

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in

THE MYSTERY OF THE
DRAGON'S HEIRLOOM





in

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OF THE
DRAGON'S HEIRLOOM**

The Three Investigators travel to a creepy castle in Transylvania, Romania, for an internship on the set for the movie *Dracula Rises*. At night in the castle, they hear eerie knocking noises. They then learn of the castle's connections with a 'vampire zombie', a mysterious brotherhood, and a boy who has gone missing for over sixty years. Although strictly forbidden to investigate, this doesn't stop Jupiter, Pete and Bob for long. Very soon, they get themselves into a lot of trouble, and not only that, their friendship is put to a test.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Dragon's Heirloom

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(The Three ???: Heir of the Dragon)

by

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Contents

- 1. Internship in Romania**
- 2. Son of the Dragon**
- 3. A Real Castle**
- 4. The Vampire Zombie**
- 5. The Forbidden Room**
- 6. Bob Learns the History**
- 7. Sedated**
- 8. The Filming Begins**
- 9. Pete Gives Chase**
- 10. Cross-Examining the Suspect**
- 11. Friendship in Turmoil**
- 12. The Dragon Medallion**
- 13. Jupiter is Up to Something**
- 14. The Secret Door**
- 15. Inside the Crypt**
- 16. Alexandru's Secret**
- 17. Questions From the Countess**
- 18. Professor Aronnax**

1. Internship in Romania

“Dear Rockies, fasten your seatbelts! We are in for a record summer. No one could have asked for a better start to the holidays. I’m DJ Wolfman for Radio Rocky Beach.”

Just as the Two-Door Cinema Club were about to start singing, Jupiter Jones switched off the car radio. The rusty pick-up truck driven by his uncle, Titus Jones, stopped in front of a house on the outskirts of town. They were at their destination where a household liquidation was taking place today.

Titus regularly went to garage sales like this to pick up bargains for his salvage yard—The Jones Salvage Yard, which he managed and operated with his wife, Mathilda. It was a well-known business in Rocky Beach as it offered customers not only scrap and used items but all kinds of curiosities.

Jupiter had been living with his uncle and aunt since his parents had died in an accident many years ago. Uncle Titus took him on shopping trips every now and then to help with the loading and unloading of items. However, that was not the only reason. Jupiter had also proved to be particularly skilled when it came to negotiating, or when it came to exposing fraudsters.

At today’s household liquidation, the garage and its driveway were full of home items, furniture and junk. A few people interested in buying strolled around and examined the items on offer. Uncle Titus tried to grab many items at once. His eyes began to light up when he spotted a tall, narrow earthenware jar among an old lawn mower and a rolled-up carpet.

“Aha! Are you interested in the amphora?” A young man approached the two while counting a few dollar notes. “I’ll give you a very good price for this late Roman antique.”

Jupiter raised an eyebrow, but remained silent at first.

“Late Roman, you say?” asked Uncle Titus.

“A unique item. A thousand dollars and it’s yours. Actually, this amphora should be in a museum.”

“You mean this vase...” Jupiter said.

The salesman looked down at him with a smile. “Excuse me?”

“In ancient times, wine or oil was stored in an amphora. One of the distinguishing features of amphorae is that they have a pointed base to allow them to be stacked upright in several layers. The pointed bases of the upper-layer amphorae rest on the spaces between the shoulders of the lower-layer ones. This piece does not have a pointed base—so it’s just a vase.”

“Aha, an expert.”

“Merely an attentive observer.” Jupiter took the vase in his hand and turned it over. There was a barely visible engraving on the bottom. He looked more closely. “*Romae factum*. So it seems to be made in Rome. Are you still interested, Uncle Titus?”

Titus Jones was unsettled. “Well, yes, actually... but if it’s not antique at all...”

“Of course it is,” the salesman contradicted angrily.

“The offer from us is fifty dollars,” Jupiter said.

“All right, kid. You’ve had your fun. There are some building blocks over there. Go play with them.”

Some bargain hunters took notice and looked over at them.

Jupiter became bolder. "All right. Let's say forty dollars."

Now the man became seriously angry. "Tell the little guy to take his jokes somewhere else. We're doing business here."

Uncle Titus nodded. "The only question is what kind."

"Obviously this man has the potential to be a swindler and that should not be underestimated," Jupiter said, pretending to talk to his uncle in confidence, but in truth he was speaking quite loudly and made sure that all the bystanders heard. "Trying to sell a weathered vase from an Italian garden centre as a genuine antique is, strictly speaking, an attempt to defraud." He spoke the last word extra loud and clear.

The salesman's eyes widened in alarm and he gestured wildly for Jupiter to stop talking. "Don't!" he hissed.

Jupiter smiled in satisfaction. "I take it that means you are ready to negotiate." His smile widened. "Shall we say thirty dollars?"

The air shimmered over the running track. Pete Crenshaw waited intently in his starting block.

His coach's voice echoed across the sports field: "On your marks..."

Pete looked up at the grandstand one last time. The race was well attended. Many of his classmates were there and also many parents. His father, however, was not, although he had promised to be there—once again.

"Get set..."

Annoyed, Pete shook off the thought. He was in a competition and had to concentrate. He had to—

A shot ripped through the air.

Pete missed the perfect start and saw his opponents passing him left and right, but that was no drama yet. He had long legs. In a split-second, he was catching up.

He took the first hurdle elegantly. The second one as well. He left Dawson and Philip behind him. Only Jeffrey was still a little ahead of him...

The third hurdle... the fourth... Jeffrey and Pete were tied... then Pete overtook him. The finish line was already ahead.

However, Jeffrey tripped at the last hurdle and fell awkwardly.

Pete was so startled that he turned around. It took only a split-second for Dawson to pass Pete and ran through the finish line first.

... And then the race was over. Applause broke out. Pete had finished second, half a second behind.

Immediately, Pete went back the track to check on Jeffrey. "Are you all right?" he asked, helping his friend up.

"Yeah, no harm done." Jeffrey patted the dust off his legs. "Stupid hurdle."

Their coach came by and asked about Jeffrey. "You alright?"

Jeffrey nodded.

"Good." The coach patted him on the shoulder. "You know how it goes. Last one in cleans up." He turned to his students. "Happy holidays to the rest of you!"

Pete went to get his bag, which was lying on the edge of the running track. He had a message from his dad on his mobile phone:

Hey, Pete, I can't make it today. I just can't get away from here. I'm really sorry. I'll make it up to you, I promise. Good luck.

That was typical again. Frustrated, Pete put his mobile phone into his pocket and looked up at the stands. There, most of the parents had received their children by now. Pete saw Jeffrey's father waiting patiently for his son. Pete went to Jeffrey, who was in the process of carrying away a hurdle. He took it from his hand. "I'll do it."

Jeffrey looked at him in amazement. "Really?"

"Sure. Your dad's waiting for you. Have a nice holiday!"

"You too. You're going to Europe with your father, right? To shoot a movie? Totally cool!"

"Yeah," Pete said without any enthusiasm. "Totally cool."

The Rocky Beach Public Library was deserted. Dust danced in the sunlight that fell diagonally through the windows. Bob Andrews sat all alone at one of the tables, where he had spread out piles of books about Romania.

He wanted to be well-prepared for the big journey. He also had to decide which of the many books to take with him as there was enough room for just one book in his luggage. Finally, he decided on *Transylvania: Facts and Legends* by Luciana Ionescu. He found it a very fascinating book and very relevant to their trip.

A shadow fell on the table. Bob raised his head in surprise. The librarian Miss Bennett stood in front of him smiling. She was also his supervisor, in a way, because Bob sometimes helped out in the library.

"Shouldn't you be home packing your suitcase for your summer trip?"

"It's already packed." Bob looked at his watch. "Darn, but I still have to go. I've got a meeting with Pete and Jupe at the salvage yard." He slammed the book shut. "I'll take this with me."

Miss Bennett nodded. "—And this too..." She handed him a small package.

Curious, Bob opened the package. It was a small, somewhat worn action camera—a robust camera which could be used to film underwater.

"A little something for the hardest working temp I've ever had."

Bob marvelled. "But Miss Bennett, surely this is much too expensive."

She winked at him. "Someone left this here years ago and it was never reclaimed."

Bob hugged the librarian. "You are the best, Miss Bennett!" He grabbed his backpack. "I really have to go now, I'm afraid."

He was almost on his way out when Miss Bennett remembered something else. "Just a minute, Bob." She handed him a folded newspaper that had been lying on the counter of the circulation desk. "There's an article in there that should interest you. Enjoy!"

"Thank you. Have a nice holiday. Don't miss me too much!"

Bob opened the newspaper immediately at the bicycle stand. He immediately found the article that Miss Bennett referred to. Now he had another reason to cycle to the salvage yard as quickly as possible. He had to tell Pete and Jupe about it!

2. Son of the Dragon

Ten minutes later, Bob rolled his bike through the entrance of The Jones Salvage Yard and waved to Jupiter's aunt, who was negotiating with a customer.

He headed for a mountain of scrap and old metal piled up in one corner of the premises. In the midst of the heap was an old refrigerator that no one would have paid any attention to. Only an attentive observer would have noticed that there was no dust on the handle of the fridge door.

Bob pulled open the door and climbed inside the fridge. Then he triggered a secret mechanism to swing the back wall aside to reveal a short dark tunnel of corrugated sheet metal. This tunnel led to an old mobile home trailer which served as the headquarters of The Three Investigators.

This discarded trailer had been sitting in the salvage yard for years. At some point, Jupiter had wheedled it away from his uncle. Since then, the three boys were allowed to use it. In return, they regularly helped out at the salvage yard.

Bob entered the trailer. Here they had everything they needed—computer and communications systems, electrical and electronic gadgets, a crime laboratory, a small kitchen with a working fridge, cabinets housing records of their past cases, and refurbished furniture obtained from the salvage yard.

The others were already there. Pete was lounging in his favourite armchair while Jupiter rummaged in their investigation equipment.

"We made the *Los Angeles Times*," Bob announced the news, unfolding the paper. "Well, not us, but the movie. Look! Half a page. Your dad gets a mention too, Pete. It says:"

Director Annabeth Parker Reinterprets A Classic

Renowned director Annabeth Parker once again takes on a character who has transformed many times throughout movie history—Count Dracula. Entitled Dracula Rises, the reinterpretation of the classic horror story will be filmed at original locations in Transylvania.

A man who breathed life thirty years ago into the most famous vampire in movie history returns in the title role—Steven Yates. He is joined by Betty Rider of Scream Queen fame.

According to Parker, the movie will not be using computer-generated imagery—a move that sets it apart from modern Hollywood productions. Instead, classic special effects will be handled by Henry Crenshaw and his Rocky Beach-based company Wonderland.

Bob lowered the paper. He beamed. "This is going to be totally cool."

"The Three Investigators in Romania," Jupiter said and went to a large world map hanging on the wall. He looked for the small European country and pressed a red pin into it. It was quite far from the blue pin marking Rocky Beach.

"Which is it—Romania or Transylvania?" asked Pete. "Is there a difference or are they one and the same?"

“Transylvania is part of Romania. It has a natural border in the east and south with the Carpathian Mountains,” Bob explained.

“Hmm... Carpathian Mountains...” Pete murmured.

“We’ll fly to the Romanian capital city, Bucharest, and then we go by road to the castle,” Bob continued.

“This will certainly be an exciting and educational trip,” Jupiter said, “and since we’re leaving tomorrow, we should start packing.”

“Well, I’ve already packed,” Bob announced. “My suitcase is at home next to my bed. I’m ready to go.”

“I’m not talking about toothbrushes and clothings.” Jupiter placed a battered sports bag on the floor and put their fingerprint kit and binoculars inside. “We should be prepared just in case.”

Pete raised an eyebrow doubtfully. “What are we supposed to do with that? We’re doing an internship with my dad. There’s no case there.”

“As I said—just in case,” Juve said. “You never know what unexpected situations we might get into. An investigator has to be ready for action at any time.”

“Oh yeah?” Pete’s eyebrow remained up.

Jupiter took their old digital camera out of a drawer to put it in the bag, but Bob held him back. “I think it’s time for an upgrade.” He took out Miss Bennett’s action camera out of his backpack and put it in the bag.

Jupiter nodded appreciatively and looked promptly at the Second Investigator.

Pete rolled his eyes and rummaged in his trouser pockets. He found a box of matches with advertising from the Wonderland company. Emphatically disinterested, he threw it into the bag. “Satisfied?”

The First Investigator obviously wasn’t, but before he could say anything back, his aunt called out to him from outside.

“Juupeeterrr!”

“Goodness! Your Aunt Mathilda...” Pete said.

The First Investigator sighed. “I’m sure she’ll want to remind me again to get her Steven Yates’s autograph.”

“The Dracula actor?” asked Bob.

Jupiter nodded. “She’s been getting on my nerves with that for days. She’s a huge fan. Ever since she knew we were going to meet Yates, she’s been re-watching all his old scary movies.”

“Then we’d better get out of here,” Pete said. “We’ll meet again tomorrow morning at Wonderland.”

“See you!” Bob waved and together they left the trailer.

Bob and Pete cycled together for a short distance before Pete turned off towards the small industrial estate of Rocky Beach. It was evening now. He wanted to meet his father, who was probably still making some final preparations for the trip at the Wonderland workshop.

The door to the hall was only ajar. Inside, a single fluorescent tube illuminated the maze of movie props that had accumulated over the years. There were deceptively real-looking torch holders, crossbows and spiked maces from their last historical movie; spaceships and laser weapons, fibreglass animal sculptures, severed body parts, and in one corner stood a coffin.

Mr Crenshaw's staff had already finished work or had left for Romania a few days ago. There was no one left in the hall. However, the light was still on in the office on the second level, which could be reached by a steel staircase. Behind the grooved glass, Pete could see a shadowy figure bending over a laptop. He heard low muttering. Apparently someone was making a video call.

Suddenly a scream echoed from the office.

Startled, Pete hurried up the steel stairs. The office door was only ajar. His father was inside, talking on a laptop to Hank Meyers, one of his co-workers.

"Hank?" his father called out. "What was that? Who was that screaming? Are you all right?"

"I was... no... I'll see... uh..." Hank's choppy voice came out of the speakers. The picture was pixelated and jerky.

"Hank? I can barely hear you. The connection is really bad."

"The recept... at... castle... n-not good..." Hank seemed to be walking around with his mobile phone or his laptop. Pete dimly recognized dark corridors and walls of stone. Another distorted scream rang out. Then a woman came running into view. She had her hair tied into two braids, which she had wrapped around her head like a crown. Her face was full of fear as she spoke to Hank in a foreign language.

"Wha... happened? ... Huh? ... Sorry, I don't speak Rom—"

"Vlad!" the woman said, pointing into the dark corridor. "V-lad!" Trying to understand more, Pete leaned too hard against the door. It swung open and he stumbled into the office.

Mr Crenshaw winced. "Pete? What are you doing here? Hank, I have to go. You've got everything under control, don't you? If there's anything else that you want us to bring tomorrow, you drop me a line, okay?"

"—Understand... uh..." Hank said and stuck his thumb out at the camera for good measure. Then the connection broke.

"Hey, Pete. There you are. Sorry about the competition today. I really wanted to come, but there was—"

"—A lot going on here," Pete said nodding.

"How did the race go?"

"Second," said Pete. "Only Dawson was faster."

"That's excellent!" exclaimed Mr Crenshaw in exaggerated glee.

Pete waved it off. He hated it when his father tried so desperately to make amends.

"I'll definitely come next time."

"It's okay, Dad." Pete pointed to the laptop. "What was going on there just now?"

"Huh? You mean the video call?"

"I heard someone shouting."

"Some trouble at the castle," his father said, giving him a searching look as he closed the laptop. "Are you in investigator mode again? I put a lot of effort into letting you three accompany me to the filming for an internship. I can't have you three playing investigators there. I can rely on you guys, can't I?"

"Sure, Dad," Pete said, silently wondering if he could actually rely on his father as well.

"Hey, second place isn't bad at all," Mr Crenshaw said, as if he had read Pete's mind, and waved his hand through his hair.

Annoyed, Pete pulled his head away. "It was no big deal, Dad, just a stupid race. I'll wait for you downstairs if you need any help." He left his father standing there and went down the stairs.

The next morning, The Three Investigators met as arranged in front of the Wonderland hall.

Pete was eager to tell his friends what had happened the night before, but first they had to help Mr Crenshaw load some last boxes of filming equipment into his van.

Originally, Bob's parents as well as Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus had wanted to accompany the three of them to the airport. However, Bob and Jupe had managed to prevent this from happening so that there would be no embarrassing farewell scenes.

They had just got into the van when Mr Crenshaw's mobile rang. "Hello, Annabeth. We're just about to go... Excuse me? ... No, not yet." Mr Crenshaw got out again while talking to the director on the phone.

Pete seized the opportunity. "You know Hank, my father's assistant?" he said in a lowered voice. "He is already in Romania at 'Piazza Castle'."

"It's Piatra Castle," Bob said. "Literary it just means 'Stone Castle'."

"Anyway, they had a video call yesterday and I overheard a woman suddenly screaming in the background."

"What kind of woman?" Jupiter asked.

"I don't know. A Romanian woman, apparently. When Hank wanted to know what was going on, she answered in Romanian. I only understood one word because she kept repeating it—Vlad."

Jupiter's ears perked up. "Vlad Drăculea?"

"Dracula?" asked Pete, startled.

Bob shook his head. "Vlad Drăculea, the voivode."

"The what?"

"Voivode—a Romanian general. Don't tell me you still haven't read the script."

"What script?"

"The script for the movie that we're helping to film," Bob reminded him. "The whole movie is about that guy."

"I thought the movie is about Dracula."

Bob sighed. "Yes and no. Vlad Drăculea was a real person who lived in Transylvania in the 15th century. I read all about it in this book here..." He held up the book he got from the library. "Today people know Vlad mainly because he became the model for a famous literary character—Count Dracula."

"So it is," Pete said.

"Count Dracula the vampire is a purely imaginary character," Jupiter added. "The British author Bram Stoker invented him, but he was inspired by Vlad Drăculea, who really existed and is said to have been very blood-thirsty."

"According to the script, the movie is a fictionalized account of the resurrection of Vlad," Bob continued. "By the way, 'Drăculea' means 'Son of the Dragon'."

Pete had a number of questions and at the same time was not sure if he really wanted to ask them. The decision was taken away from him, because at that moment, his father came back and waved his hand.

"Alright, let's go guys, or we're going to miss our plane!"

There was a big mess at Los Angeles airport. Mr Crenshaw was forever busy checking in the many boxes as extra luggage. This gave The Three Investigators the opportunity to continue their conversation.

"Why 'Son of the Dragon'?" asked Pete as they looked for a seat in the crowded waiting area.

“His father, Vlad Dracul, was already called the Dragon. He belonged to the so-called Order of the Dragon, hence the name. This brotherhood fought for the spread of Christianity at that time. Vlad Drăculea was also a member of the Order of the Dragon. He fought against the Ottomans and knew no mercy. Because of his brutality, Vlad quickly became famous—especially for the way he tortured his foes. He was also called ‘Vlad the Impaler’. You can imagine why.”

Pete preferred not to ask. While blood-thirsty scenes from the Middle Ages played out in his mind’s eye, Bob took the book out of his hand luggage again and opened it at a bookmark.

“That’s him,” Bob said, showing around the image of an old battle painting depicting Vlad as a glorious army commander on a horse.

There was something piercing and delusional about his gaze.

“Charming,” thought Pete, “and what does this guy have to do with that castle?”

“After a cruel battle against the Ottomans, Vlad was on his way back to his homeland. On his journey, he stopped at Piatră Castle, where he met Elisabeta, the daughter of the lord of the castle, and fell in love with her.”

“The poor thing...”

“He soon had to move on, but he swore his allegiance to her and promised to return to her as soon as he had won his battles. From then on they met secretly in a hidden place, until one day he did not return. He had been killed in a battle. However, according to legend till today, Vlad kept his promise to return.”

“As an undead?” asked Pete, startled.

“Bram Stoker must have come up with his vampire idea somehow,” Jupiter said calmly.

Pete shook his head in bewilderment. “Jupe, how can you always be so calm about such things?”

“They are myths, Pete,” Jupiter reminded him. “In other words, legends... and therefore nothing to be afraid of.”

“—But what if they were true?” Pete murmured barely audibly, but that was when his father came back to them.

“The equipment is finally checked in. Let’s go.”

3. A Real Castle

The flight to Romania lasted fifteen hours. The Three Investigators passed the long time with games, movies, books and the odd nap. Nevertheless, they were exhausted when they finally landed in Bucharest.

There, they were picked up by a production mini-bus and began another three hours of travel by road. They passed through small towns and villages which, with their cobblestones and old walls, seemed to be from another time.

Transylvania was mountainous and densely forested. The lush dark green crept close to the paved road. They saw deer and wild animal tracks along the way. Again and again, the narrow and winding mountain road went up steep slopes, with wisps of clouds clinging to them. The sun did not show itself. The whole country seemed like something out of a dark storybook.

When they reached their destination, the sky was still cloudy. Piatră Castle lay lonely on a mountain, dark forests spread out all around. A mountain lake bordered the rear walls of the castle.

"Finally!" Bob groaned as he climbed out of the mini-bus. He looked up at the centuries-old walls to grey towers rising into the sky. There were bay windows and embrasures and a high, crumbling curtain wall that enclosed half the castle. It was surrounded by a wide and deep moat over which a bridge led.

"This is quite a big structure," Bob remarked.

"A real castle," Pete marvelled, "just like in the movies."

"Only this view destroys the illusion a little," Jupiter said and pointed to the tens of white vans parked in front of the bridge. Dozens of people were hauling large aluminium crates with movie equipment into the castle.

"Do we have to help out with that?" asked Bob anxiously. "—Because I feel like I've run a marathon."

"—Which is probably because we've just travelled almost 11,000 kilometres and crossed ten time zones. It's now 5:53 am in Rocky Beach. Actually, we would still be fast asleep."

"I wouldn't mind," Bob murmured and yawned heartily.

"I do," Pete contradicted. "I don't feel like sleeping right now. On the way here, I was hoping that 'Piazza Castle'—"

"Piatră."

"—Might not look so scary... but it does. When I think that Vlad is haunting this place —"

"That was almost 550 years ago," Bob clarified.

"Yeah, sure."

They went on the bridge to the castle. When Jupe approached the bridge parapet and looked down, he almost instantly felt the pull of the depths on him. The moat over which the mighty bridge led was wide and deep, but now, there was only a little stream with calmly flowing water. The rest of the moat was a large grassed area with patches of native vegetation.

They entered through a large gate into the medieval courtyard. Here, small fires burned everywhere in iron bowls. The ancient walls of the castle were illuminated by spotlights and warm light shone behind narrow stained-glass windows. One by one, the movie crew gathered in the courtyard.

A tall man in his fifties, who was talking to a young woman, pushed his way through the crowd and past The Three Investigators. He bumped into Bob and didn't even seem to notice.

Bob looked at the man angrily. "Is that—"

"Steven Yates," Jupiter confirmed. "Together with his movie partner Betty Rider, the Scream Queen."

"The press regularly writes that my career is over," Yates explained to his companion a few metres away, laughing out loud. He could have been standing at the other end of the courtyard and The Three Investigators would still have heard every word, Yates made sure of that with his loud voice. "—But that's nonsense, of course. I can't save myself from offers. I just refuse to be in those terrible CGI gimmick movies where everything comes out of the computer. It was only when Annabeth assured me that everything in this movie is handmade that I agreed. No green screen, no studio stuff, but a real castle with real walls." He patted one of those walls as if it were a horse.

"He certainly lives up to his reputation as an arrogant snob," Pete muttered.

"Unfortunately, I will have to further feed Mr Yates's already inflated ego when I ask him for an autograph for Aunt Mathilda," Jupiter said, "but I suppose I can't avoid it. It's best I get it over with now."

Sighing, he pulled an autograph card from his pocket that Aunt Mathilda had given him and walked over to the actor. "Mr Yates? Excuse me, Mr Yates, could I ask for your autograph?"

Yates turned his head and pretended not to see Jupiter at first before lowering his gaze. He achieved the feat of smiling mildly and annoyed at the same time. His teeth gleamed as if he was in a toothpaste commercial.

"You see, Betty, word has spread all the way to Romania that Steven Yates is making a new movie." He pulled a classy-looking fountain pen from the inside pocket of his jacket and signed the card. "Careful, the ink has to dry first. Do you want a selfie too?"

"My battery is flat," Jupiter lied. In truth, he had not the slightest desire to take a selfie with Steven Yates. "Could you put 'Mathilda' on the card?"

"Oh, it's not for you at all?"

"For my aunt."

"Wait a minute. You speak fluent English. Are you with someone in the crew?"

"My friends and I are part of the crew. We are doing an internship here."

Steven Yates spotted Bob and Pete in the crowd. Instantly his expression darkened. "An internship? But you're just kids!"

"An early professional orientation is rarely a disadvantage for a successful personal career," Jupiter replied nonchalantly.

"Okay, okay," Mr Yates said hurriedly. "What was the name you wanted on this card?"

"Mathilda," Jupiter replied. "That's M-A-T-H-I-L-D-A."

Yates scribbled on the card 'For Mathilda' and handed it back to Juve. Then the actor turned around and just left Jupiter standing there. "Kids... ha!" he said to Betty. "There's nothing worse, except maybe precocious kids on a movie set." He laughed at his moderate wit.

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders and returned to his friends.

"Well?" asked Bob.

“Arrogant prig.”

Suddenly a low murmur went through the crowd, for an elderly lady had appeared at the top of a large flight of steps. She was wearing an old-fashioned house dress and with a scarf wrapped around her artfully pinned-up hair. By her appearance alone, one perceived her authority, although she had not yet spoken a word.

“The lady of the castle,” Bob murmured to his friends. “Countess Codrina Ekaterina Kretzulesco.”

Gradually, silence fell over the courtyard. Even Steven Yates stopped talking.

“Welcome to Piatră Castle, the family seat of the House of Kretzulesco.” The countess’s gaze passed over the crowd and had something rapturous about it, as if she were speaking to herself and not to the movie crew. She had an Eastern European accent. She spoke softly, yet her voice could be heard across the courtyard.

“I am pleased to make the home of my family available to you for your work. The movie you intend to shoot here goes back centuries in history, just as the walls of Piatră are many hundreds of years old.”

As if on cue, the outdoor electric lamps and the lights behind the windows began to flicker. Confused, everyone looked around and the lights went out completely. Only the fire bowls still illuminated the courtyard.

A vague smile played around the countess’s mouth. “Unfortunately, these centuries have not passed the castle by without leaving a trace. We often have to deal with power trips. Our caretaker Mr Repta is already working to fix the problems.” She nodded to a man The Three Investigators had not noticed.

The caretaker had been standing in an alcove and now stepped into the light next to the countess. He was dressed in a dark coat. The only bright thing about him was his blotchy, unhealthy-looking skin. Pale, he stared down at them, making no expression. At his side stood a large dog with dark fur and alert ears. He looked like a cross between a sheepdog and something very dangerous. Repta held him on a short leash.

“As pale as he is, he could pass for a vampire himself,” Pete whispered.

As if Repta had heard him, his gaze remained on the Second Investigator. Barely noticeably, he narrowed his eyes as if wondering what these kids were doing here. Pete quickly looked elsewhere.

“I hope that your work will not be too much affected by the power cuts,” Countess Codrina continued, “and I wish you a pleasant stay at Piatră Castle in our beautiful Transylvania. Good luck!”

The movie crew applauded.

“A real castle—check,” Pete said and made a ticking off gesture with his hand. “A real countess—check.”

The countess was already on her way back into the castle when a door flew open below the stairs. A woman in a brown coat hurried out. She had two suitcases in her hand. Her hair was braided into plaits that were wrapped around her head. A young slim man with dark hair ran after her and spoke to her in Romanian.

“*Familia asta e blestemată,*” the woman cried angrily. “*El o să vină și o să ieie tot ce-i al lui, cum a făcut și până acum.*”

At that moment, she noticed that the courtyard was full of people, all looking in her direction. She stopped and looked around until she spotted the countess on the stairs. “*Ce vă uitați așa la mine? Mai bine ai pleca îți voi dacă ți-neți la viață!*”

The countess froze. The Three Investigators had not understood a word, but Countess Codrina was obviously shocked. She hurriedly went back into the castle.

The woman in the courtyard ran through the crowd towards the exit.

“Bianca, *stai!*” the young man called out to her, but he could not stop her and gave up at the gate.

Bianca ran across the bridge and disappeared into the darkness.

“What was that about?” asked Bob quietly. “What did the woman say?” He looked questioningly at Jupiter.

“Huh? You expect me to understand Romanian?” Jupiter countered. “How would I know what she said?”

“But I know something,” Pete announced, lowering his voice. “That was the woman from the video call—the one who screamed in the middle of the night.”

“Are you sure?” asked Jupe.

“With the hairstyle? One hundred percent. Fellas, this is the woman who kept calling ‘Vlad’!”

Pete looked towards the gate and felt the impulse to flee as well... but nothing would come of it. For the next few days, he would be at Piatra Castle, whether he liked it or not.

“An eerie experience right after arrival...” he muttered, “check.”

After the countess had disappeared into the castle, movement came back to the crowd. Despite the confusion, everyone resumed their work.

Armed with their luggage, The Three Investigators entered the castle through an iron-barred door. The entrance hall was covered with heavy carpets. Old gold-framed oil paintings hung on the walls.

As the boys looked at the paintings as they passed, the electric light returned. A spotlight fell on an eerie portrait that seemed to stare at them.

“Look! That’s Vlad Drăculea,” Bob noted. The voivode was clearly recognizable as he was often portrayed with a thick, straight and bushy moustache as well as a piercing gaze. His headgear was also striking—a red velvet cap with a wide band of pearls, which in turn was adorned in front by a large red gemstone.

Pete averted his eyes and took a step forward. He was uneasy about this place. Although the light was working again, there was no real light in the castle, as if the walls were radiating darkness. It seemed quite logical to Pete that one would feel the desire to pack one’s bags and leave as soon as possible. It was only thanks to the many people and the commotion from the movie crew that he felt halfway safe within these ancient walls.

Everyone was heavily occupied, which was why Mr Crenshaw had asked the boys to go to their room by themselves. He had given them directions. Left to their own, they wandered the endless corridors with flagstone floors and the old wooden doors, imagining they were discovering a long-forgotten place. They climbed stone stairs with steps had been ground round over the centuries.

“Vlad Drăculea may have climbed up here,” said Bob. “Isn’t that fantastic?”

“Yes, quite great,” Pete murmured uneasily. “He probably used our toilet too.”

“In the fifteenth century there should not have been any—”

“Lighten up, Jupe,” Pete interrupted. “I was only joking.”

“Where do we have to go now?” asked Bob after they had reached the top of the stairs. Perplexed, he looked down the empty corridor. “Left or right?”

“That way,” Pete said at random and pointed to the left, without revealing to his friends that he could not remember his father’s directions exactly. He had gone a few steps when he suddenly heard soft music—a melody that was both sad and eerie, as if from a glockenspiel.

“Do you hear that?” whispered Pete, following the melody to the foot of a stone staircase that led upwards in a wide arc and was lost in the darkness.

“Probably the latest hit from Romania,” Bob said.

No one laughed. The music had a hypnotic effect on them. Although Pete found it eerie, he put one foot on the first step. Jupiter and Bob were about to follow him when suddenly, a heavy hand came down on Bob’s shoulder. He turned around startled and looked into Repta’s angry face.

“*Ce căutai sus?*” he addressed Bob but also had his eyes fixed on Jupiter and Pete. The next moment, he went a few steps up the stairs and blocked Pete from going up.

“We... we’re just looking for our room,” Bob tried to explain.

Frowning, Repta shook his head and pointed down the corridor as he continued to speak to them in Romanian: “*Valea!*”

“I suppose that means we’ve gone in the wrong direction,” Jupiter said, stepping back. “You can also say that in a friendly way.”

“Maybe that was friendly—for him,” Pete thought and looked back over his shoulder. The caretaker did not take his eyes off the boys until they had turned the next corner.

“This must be our room,” Bob said, opening the last door on the right. “Wow!”

The room was sparsely furnished with three beds that looked like exhibits from a museum. The windows were in Gothic masonry arches framed by floor-length curtains, and the window panes had leaded stained glass. An old Persian carpet lay on the stone floor, and a sweeping chandelier hung from the ceiling. All-in-all, the room had something of a lovingly decorated medieval dungeon. Nevertheless, it made a cosy impression.

“—And Vlad Drăculea himself probably slept in here,” Pete said.

Bob dropped his bag and threw himself onto the squeaky, sagging bed. “I think this room is so cool!”

“I beg to differ...” Pete countered.

“We live in a castle, Pete, what could be cooler?” Bob said. “—And the sheets are freshly laundered.”

Actually, they were to have dinner together in the dining room. However, The Three Investigators had finished eating their travel provisions on the way here and were therefore not hungry. What was more important for Jupiter was to ask Hank, Mr Crenshaw’s assistant, about the woman who had left the castle in a hurry.

Now, as they sat on their beds, which indeed smelled very fresh and pleasant, all three were overcome by great tiredness. They had got out of their beds more than thirty-six hours ago in Rocky Beach, as Jupiter calculated for them, and suddenly not even he himself felt the need to do anything else but snuggle up on the bed and sleep.

They just managed to go to the toilets, which were outside in the corridor, and brush their teeth there in the small washroom. Five minutes later, they were all in their beds.

“Good night,” Bob murmured, but the others had already fallen asleep.

They slept for eleven hours at a stretch. Only Pete was half awake once in the middle of the night because he thought he heard knocking noises somewhere, but before he could even think about it, he was fast asleep again. Maybe it had just been a dream.

4. The Vampire Zombie

When The Three Investigators entered the dining room the next morning, they were the last ones there. The movie crew had already left for work.

On the tables were empty plates and cups with remains of coffee. One of the castle employees was clearing everything away, but when the three boys entered the room, he smiled at them. The three of them recognized him as the man who had called out to the woman with the pigtails the night before.

The man immediately set out three fresh place settings. Shortly afterwards he brought each of them a huge fresh omelette filled with cubes of ham and cheese. “*Bon appétit*,” he said.

“Excuse me... do you happen to speak English?” Jupiter asked.

“A little,” he admitted. “I am Timeo, the cook. Enjoy your meal.”

He was about to turn away when Jupiter held him back. “Tell me, you were in the courtyard yesterday when the young woman excitedly left the castle, weren’t you?”

Timeo nodded. “Bianca. She works here—at least she did until yesterday. I tried to calm her down, but she was far too upset and was eager to leave.”

“What exactly happened?”

The cook was surprised by the direct question. “She thought she heard something strange and got scared.”

“Something strange?” asked Jupiter.

“Knocking noises.”

“Just like that she left the castle?”

Timeo shook his head with a smile. “Bianca believes in all sorts of things. She thought Vlad had been resurrected.”

“Vlad Drăculea?” asked Bob.

“Resurrected?” repeated Pete, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. “You mean... like a zombie? Or a vampire? Oh no, Vlad is already a vampire. A zombie vampire? A vampire zombie?”

Timeo laughed. “Yes, exactly, but that’s ridiculous, of course. *Bon appétit!*”

“We’re off to a good start,” Pete murmured after Timeo had left, but the omelette took his mind off it because it tasted excellent.

Rested and invigorated, the boys left the dining room and found most of the movie crew in a large hall on the ground floor. There was a flurry of activity, where everyone was busy connecting spotlights and setting up props.

In one corner was an impressive knight’s armour. The boys didn’t quite know whether it was real or part of the movie, but from now on they called the hall the ‘Knight’s Hall’.

Pete’s father stood with Hank next to a man-sized stone cross and spoke to a young woman in athletic clothes who had her dark hair under a cap. Pete recognized her as the director Annabeth Parker.

“Do we have enough blood?” asked Annabeth just as Jupiter, Pete and Bob joined them.

"No, but that's what these three boys are here for," Hank replied and winked at them. "Slept well?" He then introduced the three to the director.

"Ah," Annabeth said, tapping her cap. "The investigators. I've heard about you guys. I hope you're as good as special effects interns as you are at unmasking criminals."

"—And I hope they don't give you a chance to compare," Mr Crenshaw said. "You have to be careful with these three. As soon as someone even misplaces their glasses or somewhere a door creaks, they already smell the activities of a cunning gang of criminals... but so that you don't get any stupid ideas—" He gave a bottle full of red liquid to his son. "Blood," he said. "Fake blood. We need a lot of it. You'll have to mix up the right consistency so it looks real and flows down this cross nice and creepy."

Now The Three Investigators saw that the supposed cross was only a deceptively real-looking prop made of wood and polystyrene. Transparent plastic tubes and cables ran criss-cross across its back.

"See... here is the container for the fake blood, and there is a pump here that draws the liquid up the plastic tube," Jupiter said after looking at the construction.

"—And then the fake blood spurts out of that hole there when Vlad thrusts his sword into it in the scene where his lover dies," Bob added.

"Oh, someone has read the script," Annabeth noted with delight. "I think it was a good idea of yours to bring the boys along, Henry. They've got something going for them." She winked at The Three Investigators.

"We'll see..." said Mr Crenshaw. "Well, get to work!"

Together, they spent the rest of the morning mixing the fake blood. It was more complicated than they had thought. After their first attempt had turned out pretty well, Jupiter thought it should be even better. From then on, however, they made the result worse with each successive attempt.

Bob was not quite with it. He found it far too exciting to be on a real movie set in a real castle in real Transylvania and looked at everything very closely.

Finally, they went to lunch together with the rest of the crew.

"*Bon appétit*," Timeo said when it was their turn to get their meal. He slapped on each of their plates a green-brown something that didn't look particularly appetizing.

Jupiter looked around searchingly and spotted Hank sitting alone at a table, tinkering with something with a precision screwdriver. They sat down with him.

In front of Hank on the table, belly up, lay what looked like a dead bat. It looked as if Hank was dissecting it with his screwdriver.

"What are you doing?" Bob asked.

"I'm making this bat fly."

"Is that a drone?" asked Bob.

"I call it a bat-bot," Hank said, proudly holding the artificial bat in the air.

"Bat-bot?" repeated Pete. "Sounds like a superhero."

"Annabeth needs a bat for the movie. She wanted to use computer animation at first, but I suggested to her that I build one."

"Can it really fly?" asked Bob.

"It will... like a real one."

"Cool!" Bob and Pete said at the same time.

"So how do you like our vampire castle?"

"Excellent!" said Bob, while Pete made a little face and Juve only gave a thumbs up as he was chewing. He then pointed to Hank's untouched plate. "Not hungry for *sarmale*?"

Hank looked up. "For what?"

“*Sarmale*... They are Romanian cabbage rolls—a national dish here. Isn’t it a nice gesture of Timeo to prepare it for us today?”

“So you already know Timeo. That’s good. It never hurts to be friends with the cook. Have you met the other employees of the castle? The lovely Mr Repta, for example, and Van Helsing?”

“Van Helsing?” asked Bob.

“His dog.”

“His name is Van Helsing?” Bob turned to Pete with a grin. “That’s also the name of the vampire hunter in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.”

“That’s too many vampire stories for me,” Pete remarked.

“Then we have our head vampire, the charmer Steven Yates,” Hank continued. “He plays Vlad.”

“We’ve already had the pleasure of meeting him yesterday,” Jupiter said.

“—And of course Betty, the Scream Queen. She’s sitting over there.” Hank pointed unobtrusively at the young blonde actress who was Yates’s co-star. “Steven Yates might be as old as her father, but that doesn’t stop him from dancing around her all the time.”

“And why Scream Queen?” Pete wanted to know.

“Because she is famous for her sharp screams that had landed her a role or two in horror movies... Anyway, that’s enough for now. I have to get to work. Tomorrow we’ll continue with the Who’s Who at Piatră Castle.”

“You know your way around,” Jupiter said. “How long have you been here in the castle?”

“For a week.”

“Have any strange incidents caught your attention during this time?” Jupiter asked further.

Hank looked at him, puzzled. The First Investigator’s expression seemed to confuse him. He shrugged his shoulders.

“Real vampires?” suggested Pete. “Zombies?”

“Screaming women?” added Bob.

“You mean Bianca? Yes, I witnessed the drama first-hand.”

“Timeo thinks she’s just very sensitive.”

“Maybe, but at least she didn’t imagine the knocking noises. I heard them too.”

“Really?”

Hank nodded. “Regularly, since I arrived at the castle.”

Jupiter pondered. “Am I right in assuming that this phenomenon has always happened at night? And always in the same place?”

Again Hank nodded. “In the west wing. That’s where I go when I need to use my mobile phone because it’s the only place where you can get a bit of network reception if you’re lucky. At first, I thought the noise was from a water pipe or a heating pipe. In an old building like this, it’s possible... but somehow, it doesn’t sound like a pipe problem.”

The Three Investigators exchanged meaningful glances. Something was not right here.

A bell rang somewhere. The lunch break was over. Chairs scuffled across the floor and one by one everyone left the dining room.

“Fellas, you know what that means, don’t you?” murmured Pete as they returned to the Knight’s Hall. “There may not be zombies, but... ‘Piazza Castle’ is haunted.”

“Piatră,” Bob corrected him yet again.

Jupiter rolled his eyes as he bit into a Romanian chocolate bar, of which there had been a whole bowl in the dining room. It tasted of rum. Jupiter screwed up his face as it was not exactly his favourite flavour. On the other hand, it was still chocolate so he took another bite.

Suddenly Mr Crenshaw was standing behind them. “Haunted? I hope you’re talking about the script. We had a deal. Here!” He shoved a box containing a tangle of electrical devices, chargers, and power cords into Pete’s hand, in which the Second Investigator almost dropped. “These gadgets need to be charged badly…” Mr Crenshaw said, “and then you can help Hank with the coffins.”

“You know what?” Jupiter asked after Mr Crenshaw had moved away. “There is always a down-to-earth explanation for those knocking noises.”

“You mean that they could be man-made?” Bob suggested.

“Exactly, Bob—which doesn’t make them any less interesting, on the contrary. After all, a housekeeper has left the castle out of fear. In order to find out who is responsible for this, it stands to reason that we should stake out the corridor to the west wing tonight.”

Pete sighed. He carried the box of gadgets to a socket and plugged in a power bar. Then, one by one, he connected the devices to their chargers and then onto the power bar. Just when he had finished doing so, there was a low hum, the lights flickered and suddenly there was a bang. All at once, all the ceiling lights went out. Only a few movie spotlights illuminated the hall.

Mr Crenshaw came running in panic. “For goodness’ sake, Pete, what are you doing? The castle’s power grid could get overloaded with a hair dryer. Why don’t you use the power points connected to our generator?” He pointed to a massive power strip that had at least a dozen outlets. A thick power cable led from there out of the hall. Shaking his head, Mr Crenshaw took the tangle of cables from his son’s hand and did the task himself.

For the rest of the day, the boys were busy helping Hank with the coffin in which the beautiful Elisabeta, played by Betty, was to be laid in today’s filming. The coffin looked too new and needed a bit of patina to make it look like it was from the fifteenth century. They worked on it with sandpaper and removed a little of the too shiny varnish.

Pete hoped that Jupiter would have forgotten his plan by the evening, but of course he should have known better. When the Second Investigator pretended to get ready for bed after the late supper, Jupiter gave him a reproving look. “Put on something comfortable. It will be an advantage at our observation post.”

Ten minutes later, Pete knew what Jupiter had meant. The observation post was an old-fashioned wooden table that stood in the corridor to the west wing. The starched tablecloth reached down to the floor. The Three Investigators could easily hide under it—at least from first looks. However, they quickly realized that it was far too narrow for three people under the table. The wooden struts that stabilized the table legs did not make it any better.

“This is really great what you’ve come up with here, Jupe,” Pete said with annoyance and tried to push aside the elbow that was pressing into his ribs. He didn’t know who it belonged to. Maybe it wasn’t even an elbow.

“Then move back a bit,” Jupiter replied, with equal annoyance.

Pete tried. Something dug into his backside. “Arrgh! The matches!”

“What matches?” asked Bob.

“The Wonderland matches in my back pocket.”

“Why do you even have them with you?”

“You never know when you might need it.”

“Anyway, you don’t need them right now. Just take them out.”

“How?” Pete tried it and bumped the back of Jupiter’s head.

“Ouch! Watch it, Pete.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“Shhh!” hissed Jupe. “You are much too loud. The purpose of a stake-out is to conduct secret surveillance undetected.”

“The purpose of a stake-out is also to see something,” Pete objected, “but I can’t see through tablecloths or peek around the corner because the entrance to the west wing is way over there.”

“Admit it, Jupe, your plan wasn’t very well thought out,” Bob said.

“The situation appears to be so because—”

“He didn’t think it through,” Pete interrupted him angrily, flipping back the tablecloth and scrambling out of hiding.

Bob followed him.

“What are you going to do now?” asked Jupiter.

“I’ll get my camera,” Bob said. He got up and walked towards the next corner—but flinched at the last moment.

Repta was standing in the aisle. When Bob peered cautiously around the corner, he saw Repta stroking his hand over the rough surface of the wall and examining the stone masonry. He had Van Helsing with him, sniffing around on the floor. Fortunately for The Three Investigators, the black dog had not sniffed them out.

Bob beckoned his friends to join him.

“What is he doing?” whispered Pete.

Bob put his index finger to his lips in warning.

Repta was still busy with the wall and The Three Investigators watched him. A moment later, the caretaker he went down the corridor.

“After them,” Jupiter whispered, “but beware of the dog!”

With enough distance, they followed Repta. The old man walked slowly and kept looking at the walls, putting a hand here and there on the surface or tapping certain spots. First he turned right, then left, and after a few minutes of following him, The Three Investigators had lost their bearings. Repta did not notice that he was being watched, but Van Helsing became restless. He put up his ears, held his muzzle to the ground and sniffed—in their direction.

“I think the dog smells us,” Pete murmured.

Suddenly Van Helsing pulled madly on the leash. Repta gave him an angry order, but the dog did not let up. Finally Repta gave in to him and let himself be pulled along.

“Retreat!” hissed Jupiter.

The Three Investigators hurried back the way they had come.

“Darn! Which way are we going?” asked Pete at the next junction.

“Never mind, let’s get out of here first.” Bob ran to the left.

They quickly realized they were wrong, but that didn’t matter now. Repta and Van Helsing were still behind them. They were faster than the old man, but if they came to a dead end...

Suddenly a dull knocking noise echoed through the corridor. Gasping, Jupiter, Pete and Bob stopped near a staircase. The knocking repeated slowly and rhythmically, as if a giant was hammering against a wall.

“Jupe!” hissed Pete. “Do you hear that?”

“It’s not like I’m deaf.”

“We mustn’t stop, fellas,” Bob urged. “Repta could come around the corner at any moment.”

“But we are here because of the knocking,” Jupiter objected. “We can’t now—” He fell silent.

The knocking had stopped.

“Goodness, I don’t believe it!”

They listened. A distant murmur echoed through the corridor and seemed to come nearer to them.

“Dominus vobiscum; Et cum spiritu tuo. Sit nomen Domini benedictum...”

A few metres in front of them, another corridor crossed. The voice came from there. A shadow fell into the corridor. It had human form—except for the head, which was monstrously deformed. The shadow swayed back and forth, slowly approaching as the muttering grew louder: *“Dominus vobiscum; Et cum spiritu tuo...”*

“Jupe, what is it?” whimpered Pete, “like... the vampire zombie? Let’s get out of here!”

He was about to turn back, but Bob held him by the sleeve. “Here comes Repta!”

Pete clawed at Bob’s upper arm. Behind them, Repta approached. Van Helsing growled. In front of them was the vampire zombie.

“Up the stairs!” murmured Jupiter, pulling his friends along with him.

As Pete stepped onto the first steps, he recognized the stairs. Repta had confronted them here on the first evening. There being no other choice, they hurried up the steps to the next floor. Another long corridor awaited them, but at the end was...

“—A dead end,” Bob groaned. “What now?”

“There are doors ahead!” Pete ran over and rattled the first one. It was locked. The second door could not be opened either. At the third and last one, the Second Investigator closed his eyes and took one deep breath. “Come on,” he whispered and pushed down the handle.

The door swung open with a soft creak.

The Three Investigators squeezed through at lightning speed. As quietly as he could with his trembling fingers, Pete pushed the door back into the lock, pressed his ears against the door and listened.

Nothing more could be heard from outside. Very slowly, the Second Investigator relaxed.

“Fellas, that was really close,” he murmured. “I told you there would be vampire zombies.”

“Nonsense,” Jupiter objected. “I’m sure there is a rational explanation for the eerie figure whose shadow we saw.”

“Oh?” Pete wondered. “Then why did you run away?”

Jupiter did not answer.

Annoyed, Pete wanted to continue confronting the First Investigator. When he turned around, however, he was speechless. The room they had just entered was not just any room.

“Where are we?” asked Pete in amazement.

5. The Forbidden Room

The Three Investigators were standing in a room of a young person. It was a room from long ago. Instead of game consoles, posters on the walls and sports clothes lying around, there were hundreds of books and strange equipment.

On an antique desk, an old microscope was placed next to a brass lamp and a desk set with inkwell and fountain pen. Shelves held books on oceans, sea creatures and geography as well as small models of ships, steam engines and submarines.

Pete discovered a miniature aeroplane, a sextant and pictures of marine animals, while Jupiter leafed through a yellowed sketchbook in which someone had drawn ideas for machines and mechanical apparatuses. On a small table was a globe on which a number of coastal locations were marked with little flags.

At the far end of the room, half in the dark, was a large armchair facing the window. On the walls hung frames displaying pressed plant leaves and photographs of trees. There were also framed certificates, apparently for awards of special achievements. They were in Romanian and therefore incomprehensible to the boys. Only the name of the person who had received the awards stood out—Alexandru Kretzulesco.

“A boy once lived here,” Bob murmured. “Alexandru Kretzulesco—but that was probably a few years ago.”

“A few?” Pete noted that none of the books on the shelves were recent. “—At least fifty years, I’d say.”

“Sixty-four, to be exact,” Jupiter said. He had opened an old dusty album next to the globe. Inside were photos and yellowed newspaper clippings. Pasted on the last page was a flyer with a picture of a boy a few years younger than them. He had dark hair and was looking seriously into the camera. Underneath it said:

DISPĂRUT: ALEXANDRU KRETZULESCO
VÂRSTĂ 13—146 CM
20.05.1958

“*Dispărut*,” muttered the First Investigator. “That could mean ‘disappeared’... plus an age and a height... This is a missing person’s report. 13-year-old Alexandru Kretzulesco disappeared on 20 May 1958.”

“And who is that?” asked Bob. “A relative of the countess?”

Jupiter turned back a few pages and came across a family photo. It showed Alexandru smiling and holding a trophy. Next to him was a grown woman who stood proudly behind him and a younger girl. The picture was old, but the bright eyes and rapturous smile had been the countess’s even then. “If I’m not mistaken, Alexandru is her older brother.”

“Was,” Bob corrected. “He doesn’t seem to have resurfaced, otherwise it wouldn’t look like a museum in here.”

“Well observed,” Jupiter praised and continued to leaf through the album while Pete and Bob slowly walked across the room and looked around.

Pete was fine with it. Repta and the vampire zombie were out there. The longer they stayed in here, the safer he felt.

While rummaging, he came across a small wooden box. Carefully he opened it. It was an antique music box. A small brass figure representing a bearded man with a crown on his head and a trident in his hand spun in a circle while a simple melody sounded from inside the box.

“What have you found there?” asked Jupiter, curiously coming closer and taking a closer look at the figure. “Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea,” he noted. “Alexandru seems to have been passionate about everything to do with the ocean.”

“Besides, this is the music we heard last evening before Repta scared us away. Repta wanted to keep us away from this room.”

While Pete and Jupiter were busy with the music box, Bob had strolled to the other end of the room where a large leather-covered armchair stood. When his eyes fell on the motionless pale hand resting on the armrest, he struggled to suppress a cry: “F-fellas!”

Countess Codrina was sitting in the chair. Her eyes were closed. She did not move. On a small table next to her was an open book. Bob held his breath.

Pete gasped in shock when he saw the countess. “Is... is she...”

Jupiter leaned forward and held his index finger under her nose. “All clear,” he whispered. “She’s breathing.”

He looked at the book on the side table. To read the title, he had to flip the cover. It said: ‘Jules Verne—*20.000 De Leghe Sub Mări*’.

Pete felt very uncomfortable and waved at his friends to leave the room.

Jupiter did not react. He had noticed that the countess had a bookmark placed on the last page. Carefully, he opened the book at the corresponding place.

Suddenly, the countess twitched slightly and murmured something unintelligible softly.

“Hey!” Pete whispered. “She can wake up anytime!”

Jupiter signalled to Pete to wait. There was a loose pencil sketch in the book. It was some kind of apparatus again. He didn’t know what it was exactly, so he pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and took a photo.

Bob figured that if the countess saw them here, she would have a heart attack. He also signalled to the First Investigator to leave. In a hurry, Bob stepped back and his foot kicked against something on the floor and it clinked. The countess snorted.

Pete hurried to the door. It was only there that he remembered why they were here in the first place. “Oh no! The vampire zombie,” he murmured.

However, Jupiter came from behind, opened the door and peered out into the corridor. “The coast is clear,” he whispered.

They left the room and closed the door quietly.

“Oh my goodness,” Bob groaned. “She nearly caught us.”

“What’s the matter with you, Juve?” Pete whispered. “What’s so important about that book?”

“It’s the Romanian edition of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* by Jules Verne,” Juve replied.

“Surely it doesn’t matter what the countess reads,” Pete hissed, feeling very uncomfortable. “Let’s get out of here!”

“Does anyone mind if we just go back to our room now?” Bob asked,

“Not at all,” Pete said quickly, “and before you say anything else, Juve—you’re out-voted.”

The Second Investigator ran down the stairs, eyes fixed on the steps to avoid tripping. By the time his eyes fell on a pair of black work boots, it was already too late.

Van Helsing growled while Repta gloomily glared at the three boys. He must have seen exactly which door they had come out from. There was no escape.

The caretaker clenched his right hand into a fist and pounded loudly three times on the door to Mr Crenshaw's bedroom. Shuffling footsteps could be heard.

A moment later, a confused Mr Crenshaw, who had obviously just been roused from sleep, opened the door. He looked from Repta to his son to Bob and Jupiter and Van Helsing and back to Repta.

"Yes? What's the matter? Has something happened?"

Repta was angrily talking to Mr Crenshaw in Romanian, gesticulating wildly.

Mr Crenshaw blinked. "I'm sorry, I don't understand you, Mr Repta."

Repta didn't seem to care. "*Sper să fie ultima dată*," he said with one last grim look, pulling Van Helsing behind him and disappearing around the next corner.

"Pete, what's going on?" asked Mr Crenshaw lurkingly.

The Second Investigator lowered his eyes in shame. "We... well, it's like this, we were... sort of..."

"Stop stammering, Pete, and talk some sense to me!"

"We were in the countess's room," Pete blurted out, "because we were... uh... escaping from the vampire zom—"

"You were where?" Pete's father was horrified. "Why are you even hanging around the castle in the middle of the night?"

"We wanted to investigate the knocking noises Hank heard," Pete defended himself.

"That's right." Bob nodded affirmatively. "There's something not right about that."

Mr Crenshaw shook his head reproachfully. "Today it's knocking noises and vampires, then tomorrow it's a poltergeist or an island of death. Didn't we agree to keep your obsession of investigation off this time?" He looked sharply from one to the other. "This is a movie set, not a playground. You are here for an internship, so just keep to it. Now, off to bed with you!"

Shortly afterwards, they were back in their room. Pete was dejected.

"Don't worry about it," Bob said sympathetically. "Your dad will calm down."

"Let's hope so," the Second Investigator muttered and threw himself face first onto the bed. He was exhausted and frustrated and wanted to rest.

Jupiter, on the other hand, wandered slowly up and down the room, pinching his lower lip.

"A missing boy, unexplained knocking noises in the night and an employee who believes that Vlad Drăculea has been resurrected. It all sounds very promising."

"Don't forget the vampire zombie," Bob said. "I can't explain that shadowy figure with the huge head either."

"Very true, Bob. While I'm sure there's a logical explanation for all this, until we know it, further investigation is essential... or to put it briefly, we have a new case."

Pete jumped up from the bed and confronted Jupiter. "Tell me, are you crazy?"

"Pete, calm down," Bob tried to mediate, but Pete wasn't listening to him at all.

"You just heard my dad. I don't want to get into any more trouble just because you smell conspiracies again."

"There was never any talk of conspiracies," Jupiter clarified in a matter-of-fact manner. "I have merely noticed a series of unusual events which suggest that something is not right here, which is why it would be advantageous to get to the bottom of possible causal connections in order to find—"

Pete raised his index finger threateningly, silencing Jupiter. “Don’t get on my nerves, Jupe! You heard my dad. We’re here for an internship. The end.” He threw himself back on the bed, turned his back on the others and switched off the light.

Jupiter merely shrugged his shoulders and calmly looked at the photos on his mobile phone that he had taken of the drawings in the countess’s book. Someone had sketched a cylindrical apparatus from different perspectives. The apparatus looked like a cross between a wine barrel and a boiler with a stove pipe sticking out of it. However, Jupiter had no idea what exactly he was looking at.

“Another mystery,” he muttered just loud enough for Bob and Pete to hear.

6. Bob Learns the History

The next day, the argument between The Three Investigators had not yet been forgotten, but Pete's anger had dissipated a little. Maybe it was because they had a more fun task today than making litres of fake blood or grinding down coffins. They were also allowed to try out the bat-bot together with Hank.

Hank was as excited as a little child before Christmas. He had made final improvements to the flying robot until late at night.

The air was clear and windless as they left the castle together. Hank led them to the grassed area of the moat. This was an ideal place for a test flight.

"Let's do it then," said Hank, switching on the bat-bot and the remote control and letting the artificial bat flap its wings.

"It's taking off!" shouted Bob enthusiastically as he filmed the first flight attempt with his action camera.

The bat-bot fluttered a little shakily, as if it had just learned to fly. In actuality, of course, it was Hank, who was not yet completely familiar with the controls, but with time, it worked better and better and he let the drone fly big loops and tight turns.

"Watch out, just behind the wall is the lake," Pete warned. "I don't think bats can swim. If that thing sinks, it's gone because the lake is deep. I looked at it yesterday."

"Thanks for the warning," Hank said and steered the drone in a wide arc out of the danger zone. "—And now a dive," he muttered. The bat-bot flapped its wings and plummeted—right towards The Three Investigators. Only at the last second did Hank intercept the fall and let the artificial bat fly over the boys' heads.

"Sorry, boys!" shouted Hank.

Bob, who had thrown himself on the ground, pulled himself up again and knocked the dirt off his trousers. "Your father should pay a higher insurance premium for us, Pete. It's life-threatening here."

"There's a vampire zombie running around here and you're worried about a bat drone?" Pete asked.

"In order to realistically assess the actual danger posed by your so-called vampire zombie, we should urgently investigate further," Jupiter said. "Step one—we need to find out more about the castle and its history."

Bob nodded. "The only question is how. We're stuck here in the middle of nowhere. There isn't even a bus here that could take us to the next town."

"Now you're starting it again," Pete said. "I don't believe it."

Bob looked up at the bat-bot. "You know what? We should try attaching my action camera to the bot. I'm sure it'll get some cool footage. Do you think you can do that, Hank?"

"If it's not too heavy—sure."

Suddenly Bob saw someone moving behind one of the castle windows. It was Countess Codrina. She was looking down at them.

"The countess is up there watching us," Bob murmured to the First Investigator. "Don't look! Do you think Repta told her something about last night?"

"It's difficult to judge—"

“Hey!” shouted Pete, pointing in the air.

Bob and Jupiter instinctively ducked their heads, but the warning had been for Hank, who had just made a reckless flying manoeuvre. Now the drone was hurtling right towards the wall of the moat. Hank just managed to pull it up, but then it went into a spin like a dry leaf and he lost control. By now, the bat-bot disappeared from their sight. Then they heard tyres squealing.

“Oh, no,” Hank muttered and ran off. The Three Investigators followed him.

When they were running, Bob quickly looked once more at the window. The countess had disappeared.

An old Dacia was parked in front of the entrance to the bridge. A young woman was kneeling in front of the bonnet and was picking up the drone that had apparently crashed into her car.

“Sorry!” shouted Hank from a distance. “That was us.”

“Did something happen to you?” asked Pete worriedly.

The woman with the long brown hair stood up and held the drone by one wing with pointed fingers. “Not to me, but one of my car headlights... and this thing... I thought it was real at first.”

Hank received the bat-bot and immediately examined the broken wing, while Bob went to the car and helpfully picked up the shards of the headlight. When he went to hand them to the driver, he recognized her.

“Are you Luciana Ionescu?” he asked.

Everyone looked at Bob questioningly. “You know each other?” Hank guessed.

The young woman shook her head and smiled in confusion. “Not that I know.”

“You are a historian and an expert on Transylvania and Vlad Drăculea,” Bob said reverently. “I have read your book *Transylvania—Facts and Legends*. It was really... uh... very informative and exciting.”

“Luciana is our historical advisor,” Hank explained, “so we don’t do or say anything nonsensical in our movie.”

She nodded flattered. “—And you are...”

“Jupiter Jones, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews,” Jupiter said.

Embarrassed, Bob handed her the headlight shards. “We’re really sorry.”

She waved it off. “Never mind.”

“If you give me half an hour, I’ll fix it for you quickly,” Hank offered.

She looked at her watch. “How about ten minutes? Because I have an appointment in town. I’m meeting with the museum director about the medallion.”

“Ah, the medallion,” Hank said. “I’ve heard about it.”

Jupiter’s ears perked up. “You’re going to town?” A grin crept onto his face. “That’s nice timing.”

Fifteen minutes later, the Dacia rolled along the lonely country road with a hastily patched headlight. Luciana Ionescu was at the wheel and next to her in the passenger seat was Bob, who was rubbing his sweaty hands on his trousers.

Bob was a little excited. He had really enjoyed reading the Transylvania book, and suddenly he was sitting next to the author herself. Actually, he had a thousand questions for her, but ever since Jupiter’s surprise suggestion that Bob could follow Luciana to town, he couldn’t get a word out.

“Your friend Jupiter is a fast thinker, isn’t he?” Luciana said as if she had read his thoughts. “He took advantage of the opportunity right away.”

“Yes, that’s typical of him,” Bob confirmed. “He doesn’t hesitate for long.”

“I’m going back to the castle in an hour,” Luciana announced. “Is that enough time for you?”

Bob nodded. “What’s this appointment with the museum director? You mentioned a medallion earlier. Does that have something to do with the movie?”

She nodded. “I don’t know if I can tell you though. It’s kind of a surprise Annabeth and I are working on. It may or may not work out, we’ll see. When it does, you’ll know.”

They reached the small town. Bob immediately noticed that everything here was much smaller than back home in California. The pavements, the cars, the houses made him feel like he was in a dwarf country.

The Dacia rumbled along old cobblestone streets that seemed far too narrow to Bob. Eventually Luciana stopped the car in front of the public library. Bob thanked her, got out and scowled at the dilapidated building. “I hope I can find something here,” he muttered and stepped through the door.

Inside, however, he was pleasantly surprised. Although it smelled of old books and linoleum flooring, the two computers available to visitors were brand new. Since he didn’t understand Romanian, Bob didn’t even go look at the history books. Instead, he went straight for the Internet computers. There was a translation function for the Romanian hits.

Soon Bob had found a very informative page about the history of the castle and the Kretzulesco family. First, he wanted to find out about the missing Alexandru. He did not have to search for long.

An article confirmed what Jupe had already suspected—Alexandru Kretzulesco was the brother of Countess Codrina Ekaterina Kretzulesco and he had disappeared without a trace at the age of thirteen. At the time, several newspapers had tried to outdo each other with ludicrous conjectures.

‘Noble Scion Taken by Vlad?’ read one headline. So it was not only the housekeeper Bianca who had succumbed to the belief that Vlad Drăculea could rise from the dead. Stories of this kind had been circulating for more than sixty years. There was also talk of an heirloom that Vlad had supposedly hidden somewhere.

The next interesting article Bob found was about a mysterious brotherhood known as ‘*Moștenirea Dragonului*’, which translated meant ‘Heir of the Dragon’.

“A mysterious brotherhood?” muttered Bob, eagerly taking notes.

The brotherhood had met in a secret location within Piatră Castle—an underground crypt. Bob was puzzled. He had never heard of a crypt there before. On the contrary, in the Knight’s Hall, the members of the movie crew had been busy since yesterday creating a room that looked like a crypt. If there was a real crypt in Piatră Castle, why hadn’t Annabeth moved the filming there?

Bob looked at his watch. Darn, he only had five minutes until Luciana came to pick him up. He hurriedly tidied up his notes, left the computer room and went to the circulation desk, where a young librarian was reading a book. Smiling, she looked up.

At that second, Bob remembered that he didn’t speak a word of Romanian. “Uh, excuse me, I’m looking for a floor plan of Piatră Castle.”

The librarian looked at him questioningly.

“Floor plan,” Bob repeated, even though he knew that wouldn’t get him anywhere. “Er... *uno momento*... A plan... for Piatră. *Un... plan?*”

The librarian raised her shoulders regretfully. She did not understand what Bob wanted from her.

Then Bob's gaze fell on a framed map on the wall. "*Un plan*," he repeated, pointing to the map. "—For Piatră Castle."

The young woman's face lit up. "*Ah! Un plan al Castelului Piatră! Ai nevoie de un plan al Castelului Piatră?*"

"*Oui, oui*, uh... *ja, ja!*" Bob confirmed. "Plan! Floor plan!"

Proud and happy to have understood Bob and to be able to help him, the young woman immediately turned to the computer. Her fingers flew over the keyboard. Then she turned the computer monitor in Bob's direction. It displayed a building floor plan which was obviously a scan of an old drawing. '*Castelul Piatră*' was written in curved letters above it. Bob skimmed the plan and quickly found what he was looking for—one of the rooms was marked with the word '*Criptă*'.

Bob nodded excitedly. "*Si, si...* uh... print once, please. Uh... 'printo'... *oui...*"

Fortunately, the librarian had understood him immediately. A moment later, the printer buzzed.

"Would you like some?" Luciana asked after Bob had got in and they had set off. She held out a paper bag containing round, greasy-looking doughnuts.

"Doughnuts, yummy," Bob said and reached for one.

"Here they are called *gogoși*," Luciana explained to him and took one for herself.

"Tastes really good, this '*gogoși*,'" Bob said after the first bite.

"It's *gogoășă*," she corrected him. "'*Gogoășă*' is singular. For plural, it's '*gogoși*'."

"Wow! How could I even remember that?" Bob remarked. "I suppose Romanian is a difficult language to learn."

"Not really, if you are well-versed with Romance languages," Luciana said. "However, I've heard that Romanian is widely considered to be the trickiest of the Romance languages." She laughed. "Anyway, were you successful in getting what you wanted?"

Bob nodded as he flicked through his notes, chewing.

"What was it about?"

"A school project," Bob said evasively. That was his standard answer when adults wanted to know why he was collecting important information that was actually for their investigations. With that, everyone was always quickly satisfied and immediately much more helpful. "I'm writing a paper on Piatră Castle. You know quite a bit about it, don't you?"

Luciana smiled. "You could say that—if I can be of any help..."

"Have you ever heard of Vlad's heirloom?" asked Bob straightforwardly. "I just stumbled across it by chance."

"Vlad's heirloom?" Luciana repeated, looking out of the window for a moment, where one could just see down a wide valley to the dark forests of Transylvania. She bit into her *gogoășă* again. "Yes, I've heard about that. The heirloom is a legend. The most common version is that it is the blood-red ruby that Vlad Drăculea always had with him. It was set in a star of gold, which was attached in front of his headgear. This ruby and star can be seen on many contemporary portraits of Vlad, including the one hanging in the castle. Perhaps you have already seen it."

Bob nodded.

Luciana continued: "Vlad is said to have worn the stone during his battles. According to legend, this ruby made him invincible. Another aspect of the legend is that he had a mistress

at Piatră Castle. She was Elisabeta, the daughter of the lord of the castle. Vlad is said to have given her the ruby so that no misfortune would befall her. The misfortune, however, befell him instead. As soon as he no longer had the ruby with him, he was murdered after losing a battle. His head was then cut off.”

“Creepy,” Bob said.

“After Vlad’s death, countless people went in search of the ruby. To this day, however, it has not been found.”

“Do you think it really exists?”

Luciana thought for a moment. “Well, yes and no,” she finally said. “I’m sure this stone existed, but I’m also sure that it was taken by someone during the chaos of war. Regarding Vlad giving it to Elisabeta and that it is still hidden somewhere today, I think that’s a nice bedtime story—because that’s exactly what it was for me. My own grandfather often told me about this heirloom. It fascinated me as a child. Maybe that’s why I became a historian.”

Bob nodded thoughtfully and flicked through his notes again. “I also came across a brotherhood called ‘Heir of the Dragon’.”

“You’ve unearthed quite a lot there,” Luciana said appreciatively. “This brotherhood was founded almost a hundred years ago. It was modelled after the ‘Order of the Dragon’—the brotherhood which Vlad Drăculea and his father belonged to in the Middle Ages. The later brotherhood, however, was formed by a group of people who worshipped Vlad Drăculea almost fanatically, hence the name ‘Heir of the Dragon’. It was a very conspiratorial community where not everyone had access to. There were strict rules and admission rituals.”

Bob looked at his notes again. “The brotherhood was founded by Georghe Popes... Popescu and Sorin Kretzulesco. The countess’s name is Kretzulesco, isn’t it?”

“Sorin Kretzulesco was her father,” Luciana confirmed. “He and Popescu called themselves the ‘Barons of the Brotherhood’. They were also the ones who created all the rules.” Luciana’s face darkened. “—And the cruel rituals... but I won’t tell you anymore about that today, otherwise your classmates will get scared when you present your findings at school.”

“It would be great if they got scared,” Bob said. He wanted to know more. “What were those rituals?”

“You really want to know?”

He nodded.

Luciana steered the Dacia around a bend and braked. They were standing in front of a flock of sheep that was being driven across the road by a shepherd. The shepherd greeted them in a friendly manner, but took all the time in the world for himself and his sheep.

“To be accepted into the brotherhood, you had to be locked in the crypt for one night,” Luciana said.

“Crypt?” Bob asked, pretending he had never heard of it.

“An underground sanctuary that sometimes serves as a burial place. In Vlad’s time and even after that, members of the noble family were buried in the crypt of Piatră Castle. This was where Vlad and Elisabeta secretly met. It was also where he swore his eternal allegiance to her and finally gave her the ruby before he left for the battle that was to be his last. That’s according to legend, of course.”

“Sure.”

“The crypt was the perfect place for such a initiation ritual because of its connection to Vlad. Alexandru Kretzulesco was also imprisoned there. His father Sorin had decided that Alexandru should become the next baron of the brotherhood. He was just thirteen when the initiation ritual took place.

“At sunset, he was locked in the crypt... and at sunrise... he was gone.”

7. Sedated

“What do you mean ‘gone’?” asked Pete as casually as possible.

“By that I mean gone missing—disappeared... without a trace.”

When Bob returned to the castle, Jupiter and Pete had been busy moving furniture out of the Knight’s Hall and into an adjoining room. Bob had therefore not yet had the opportunity to report on his research findings. Now, however, they were finally in their room. Bob spread his notes and printouts on the floor and sat down cross-legged on the Persian rug together with Jupiter.

Pete had planned to show his disinterest in their case by lying on the bed and playing with a tennis ball. In reality, however, he was curious and still wanted to know what Bob had to say.

“The newspaper articles only mentioned that Alexandru was last seen in the crypt,” Bob continued. “Why and how—that’s what Luciana told me.”

“No wonder,” Jupiter agreed. “A father locks his own son in a pitch-dark crypt for a whole night as a bizarre initiation ritual for an equally bizarre brotherhood that worships a brutal warlord. That would have caused a scandal even then. Therefore, the Kretzulesco family certainly kept a low profile and did not reveal everything to the police. Nevertheless, the authorities were of course informed after thirteen-year-old Alexandru remained missing.”

“He was searched for everywhere, but without success. Of course, rumours quickly spread that Vlad had taken the boy.”

“The vampire zombie,” Pete muttered.

“Didn’t we agree that there are no vampire zombies?” asked Jupiter.

“Then maybe it was Repta.”

“Don’t be silly, Pete,” Jupiter said reproachfully. “The incident happened over sixty years ago. Back then, Repta was still in kindergarten.”

Before Pete could retaliate with something sarcastic for the mood to erupt again, Bob quickly intervened: “Anyway, the entrance to the crypt was sealed up as a result. Apparently the Kretzulesco family was also afraid of further incidents. In any case, I found the location of the crypt on an old floor plan of the castle.” Bob spread out the printout.

“Excellent, Bob,” Jupiter said appreciatively and immediately immersed himself in the plan.

“If I’m not mistaken, the entrance to the crypt was right here,” Bob said, “between the west wing and the corridor where we heard the knocking noises yesterday.”

“Extremely informative,” Jupiter thought. “Perhaps we will be able to find the exact location.”

Now Pete straightened up in his bed. “Tell me, are you still up to it? A missing boy, knocking noises coming from a lost crypt—don’t you see the connection or don’t you want to see it? It’s quite clear what’s going on. Vlad wants to get out of the crypt and get a new victim. Bianca the housekeeper understood immediately and left in time. Jupe, what don’t you understand about that?”

The First Investigator sighed. “Pete, the irrationality of your reasoning is sometimes startling. Vlad has been dead for over five hundred years. That’s why another conclusion

seems far more logical to me—what if no one wanted to get out of the crypt—but into it?”

“Into it?” repeated Pete. “Why would anyone want to do that voluntarily?”

“To find Vlad’s heirloom?” pondered Bob.

“That’s exactly what we need to find out.” The First Investigator’s eyes flashed with drive. “We need to get to the corridor tonight.”

“Are you serious?” Pete was upset. “A boy has disappeared here without a trace. If we’re not careful, we might be next!”

“I would put it as nobody has found any traces... yet,” Jupiter countered. “As investigators, it is our duty to investigate this mystery.”

“Our duty is to help my dad,” Pete objected. “That’s why we’re here.”

Jupiter raised his voice to answer, but at that moment, there was a knock at the door.

“Thank the vampire zombie,” Bob muttered and stood up. “It’s unbearable with you two sometimes.” He opened the door.

Outside, Timeo stood nodding amiably at the three of them. He pushed an old-fashioned serving trolley in front of him, on which there was a teapot and a row of cups. Three of them were already filled and stood on a small tray. Timeo handed it to the puzzled Bob.

“Gentlemen, a little greeting from the kitchen because tomorrow is the start of filming. It’s an old tradition in Romania. Enjoy it.”

“Thank you. Very kind of you.”

Timeo winked at them and pushed on with the trolley to the next room.

“It’s a Romanian tradition to serve tea at the start of a movie filming?” Pete raised an eyebrow questioningly.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean it that way,” Bob said as he handed Pete and Jupiter each a cup decorated with the Kretzulesco family crest.

Bob was grateful for Timeo’s surprise visit. Firstly, it had interrupted the back-and-forth bickering between Jupiter and Pete; secondly, he now knew how he should respond to Juve’s suggestion to search for the entrance to the crypt.

“The start of filming was a good cue,” Bob said. “Who knows what we’ll be up against tomorrow. In any case, we should be well-rested, and therefore not be spending the night in some draughty corridor. After all, the crypt is not going to run away from us.”

“Agreed,” Pete said before Jupiter could even catch his breath. He grinned at the First Investigator. “Juve, you’re out-voted.” He took a large sip of tea with relish.

Bob was relieved that the discussion had come to an end. He found the tea only half delicious, but he didn’t want to throw it away either.

Jupiter, in turn, put the tea aside after only a small sip—not so much because he didn’t like it, but because his mind was already elsewhere. So Bob and Pete didn’t want to take part in another inspection at the corridor—fine. He would just have to proceed on his own.

Two hours later, the castle was quiet. Pete and Bob were fast asleep. Outside in the corridor, the last steps into the washrooms had faded away half an hour ago. Jupiter was pretty sure that by now no one was awake—except those who had a mission—like him.

He flipped back the bedspread and stood up carefully so the spring mattress wouldn’t squeak. Then he put on a warm jumper and an extra pair of socks and crept over to Bob’s travel bag, which lay open beside his bed. Between the library book and a portable Bluetooth speaker, Jupiter found what he was looking for—the action camera.

Before he left, Jupiter reached for his water bottle, but it was empty. He drank the cold tea instead and quietly left the room.

As expected, no one was hanging around in the corridors. In the faint glow of the night lights, he made his way around the castle towards the west wing. This time he did not get lost once.

In the corridor where they had heard the knocking noise, all was quiet. Jupiter inspected the wall. The stone masonry blocks were seamlessly joined. There was not a single place where it looked as if an entrance had been sealed up. He conscientiously tapped the wall. Nowhere did it sound hollow. Disappointed, he gave up. So it was not that easy to find a forgotten crypt.

As in the previous night, Jupiter took up position under the table. There was enough room for him alone. He used his mobile phone to connect to the action camera and placed the camera just outside his tablecloth hiding place so that it recorded the corridor. Now it was time to wait.

Suddenly, a wave of tiredness rolled in. Jupiter shook it off angrily. Not now! He could sleep later. Determined to stay awake, he took a few deep breaths.

A little later, he pulled himself up because his head had fallen back. Had he dozed off? A glance at his watch revealed yes, he had—for about five minutes. This could not happen again. He sat down differently and forced himself to keep his eyes open. He couldn't help thinking of Pete's Wonderland matches. If he had them with him now, he would try to clamp them between his eyelids like a cartoon character so that his eyes wouldn't fall shut. What was the name of that cartoon with the cat, the bird and the dog?

Jupiter shook himself. He was already starting to nod off again... Cat, bird, dog... He had to keep at it! He had only been here half an hour and the night was still long. Tomorrow morning he could rest but not now. Now he needed matches.

Cat, bird, dog...

Matches...

As Jupiter Jones slumped down, he kicked against a table leg, but even that did not wake him up.

8. The Filming Begins

The bedroom was lit by flickering candles in many-armed brass chandeliers. The embroidered brocade curtains of the four-poster bed shimmered golden.

On the floral white pillow lay Elisabeta's head, framed by her long golden curls. Her eyes were filled with fear. Panic-stricken, she kept backing away from the dark figure in the black cloak bending over her.

The man stretched out his claw-like hands towards Elisabeta, his lips opened to reveal long, pointed canines. The deep-set eyes in the pale face were those of an animal—a vampire!

Elisabeta's mouth opened in a scream, but panic tightened her throat.

"Listen carefully," the vampire murmured. His voice was like the growl of a wild wolf. "The children of the night, what... what..." The vampire faltered.

The beautiful Elisabeta barely moved her lips as she whispered: "What music they play..."

"Damn it!" the vampire cursed, turning away from Elisabeta and clenching his fists.

"Cut!" shouted Annabeth Parker and the tension drained from Elisabeta's body. The movie crew also relaxed. The man with the boom lowered the microphone attached to a pole. The camera moved back to the starting position.

"Let's start again," Annabeth asked, pulling the headphones from her ears with which she had been monitoring the audio. She turned to Steven Yates, who was in the vampire costume. "Are you all right, Steven?"

"Yes, yes. It's just this script... and under all this make-up I'm sweating like... There are way too many people in the hall. I can't concentrate." Frowning, he looked over at Pete and Bob, who had been watching the filming from the other end of the Knight's Hall.

"We'll take a five-minute break," Annabeth called out to the team, "and Henry, can I have a little more fog? It's a dream sequence after all."

"Not going so well for Yates," Pete murmured. "That's the third time he's blown it."

"Maybe we're making him nervous," Bob suggested, "or maybe he still needs to get into character."

"Yes, exactly... getting into Dracula," Pete continued. "I can tell you what his problem is—he sucks at memorization. I can relate to that. My Spanish vocabulary only ever stays in my head for ten seconds, but then I'm not an actor."

"Come on, let's continue with the glowing water," Bob suggested. "I don't really need to see this scene a fourth time. I know the script by now."

For today, they had been given the task of making glowing water using water-based fluorescent powder. When the powder was mixed into a solution, it was invisible but glowed bright under ultra-violet light. The glowing water was needed as background decoration for the next scene and, according to Hank, they should glow in different intensities. After making solutions of various colours and concentrations of the powder and filling them into glass flasks, Bob and Pete repeatedly pointed a UV lamp at the vessels to check the degree of luminosity.

Meanwhile, Pete let his gaze wander around the hall. The movie people were busy fixing Betty's hair, smoothing the bedspread and dabbing the sweat from Steven Yates's face. Pete's father started the fog machine and, together with Hank, distributed the fog with the help of large cardboard fans.

Only one person was missing.

"I wonder where Jupe is?" Pete asked.

"He has to show up any second," Bob said. "After all, he was out of bed before us this morning."

"—Or he wasn't in it in the first place," Pete muttered suspiciously.

A loud sneeze echoed through the hall. Steven Yates waved it in the air. "Not so much fog!" Yates bellowed. "I told you I'm allergic to this stuff." He jumped up from his folding chair and stormed off in a huff.

"Steven!" Annabeth called after him. "We're almost ready."

"I'm going to the toilet," he replied angrily and rushed past Pete and Bob to the exit. There he almost collided with Jupiter, who entered the hall just then. "You damned kids on the set. Get out of the way!" Yates nudged Jupe aside.

Shaking his head, Jupiter looked at the actor rushing off before joining Bob and Pete at the work table. "Looks like someone got out on the wrong side of the coffin."

"At least he was on time," Pete said. "Where have you been?" He glanced at Jupiter, who looked a little ruffled. His hair looked as if he had just fallen out of bed.

"You could at least have changed your clothes." Pete wrinkled his nose. "—Or taken a shower."

At that moment, Bob noticed what Jupe was holding. "Hey, what are you doing with my camera?"

"Wait a minute," Pete said. "You took Bob's camera and you look like you just woke up on a park bench... or under a table. Were you at the corridor to the west wing last night? Are you serious?"

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders in emphatic indifference. "You two wanted to sleep, didn't you?"

"—And we did," Bob said. "Quite a long time, actually. We were half an hour late ourselves. We didn't even hear the alarm clock. Pete's dad was not amused. It's best to avoid him today. How did your stake-out go?"

Jupiter shook his head. "Not good. I went straight to sleep in my hiding place and only woke up a few minutes ago under the table. Strange, isn't it? You could bet that someone had intended us all to be fast asleep."

"So yet another conspiracy theory," Pete said annoyingly as he stirred around in his flask filled with water. The stupid fluorescent powder just wouldn't dissolve fully.

"Well, after all, all three of us consumed the same thing."

"You mean the tea?" asked Bob, "but you didn't drink it."

"I did, just before I left the room"

"Do you think Timeo put something in there for us?"

"Yeah, sure," said Pete. "Timeo mixes a sleeping potion into our tea and then serves it to us himself. Really clever and totally inconspicuous. You're on to something, Jupe."

"Mistake, Pete." Jupiter switched on the action camera and selected the last video clip the camera had recorded. "This one is my hot lead."

Curious, Bob came closer, while Pete pretended that none of this interested him.

On the small display of the camera, a part of the corridor could be seen at an oblique angle. A pair of heavy work boots came into view. Jupiter paused the video clip and zoomed

in closer.

Pete peered over his shoulder at the camera. "A pair of boots," he commented boredly. "Wow. Great camera work, by the way. Very ingenious."

"That's completely beside the point," Jupiter said. "These clips are proof that someone was walking through the corridor while I was asleep last night. The only question is who."

"Pete!" called Hank from the other corner of the hall. "Will you come here? We need some more fresh blood!"

Pete put down the flask and was about to go to Hank when he paused and took another look at the display. He frowned. "I know who that is. I know those boots."

Although The Three Investigators had been on set so late, they could hardly wait for the lunch break today.

Finally Annabeth called out: "The scene is in the can, thank you very much. We're taking an hour for lunch!"

Immediately the boys hurried out of the Knight's Hall. They did not go to eat, however, but outside, where the sun fell on the castle garden. It was half overgrown. In former times, another part of the castle must have stood in its place, for everywhere, ruined remains of walls and former parts of buildings rose from the ground. At the edge of the garden, Repta lived with his dog Van Helsing in a small stone cottage.

"And you're really quite sure?" asked Jupiter as they made their way to Repta's cottage. "—That they are Repta's boots, I mean?"

"How many times are you going to ask me that, Juve?" asked Pete, annoyed.

"I believe you," Jupiter clarified. "I just wonder if it was just wishful thinking."

While Pete was wondering about what Jupiter meant by that, they reached the cottage.

"Careful, fellas," Bob warned. "Repta is home!"

"How do you know that?" asked Pete.

"Van Helsing's leash dangles from the hook next to the door."

Between box hedges and low walls, they crept closer until they reached a dirty window. Cautiously, they peered inside.

The caretaker sat at a meagre table in front of a plate and was scraping out the last remains of a stew. Van Helsing dozed at his feet.

"He's having lunch too," Bob whispered.

When Repta stood up, they clearly saw the heavy boots on his feet.

Pete was triumphant. "What did I say?"

Repta grabbed a raffia basket that was on the floor, patted Van Helsing and left the cottage. The dog stayed behind.

"Take cover," Jupiter hissed and The Three Investigators scurried around the corner. They waited until Repta was a little way away and followed him at a proper distance.

The caretaker crossed the garden, passing small willows and more ruined remains of walls, until he reached a knee-high well with a wooden lid.

There he put down his basket and sat on the ground. The Three Investigators hid behind a rock.

"What's he doing?" whispered Bob.

"Looks like he's digging something up," Jupiter said.

Repta put a plant in his basket and continued digging. After a few minutes, the basket was well filled. The caretaker rose with a groan and went back.

"Let's take a closer look," Jupiter said after Repta had gone off.

Next to the well were plants with dark green fleshy leaves that looked like a cabbage variety. The leaves formed a kind of nest, from the centre of which pale violet flowers grew up. They gave off a slightly musty smell. Jupiter touched the leaves, smelled the flowers and picked one off.

“*Mandragora officinarum*,” he said with an expert’s expression.

“I beg your pardon?” asked Pete.

“Also known as the common mandrake—a plant species from the nightshade family.”

“What are they for?”

“Mandrake is a medicinal plant that has been known for centuries. Unprocessed, the root is highly poisonous. In special doses, however, it is quite useful. Already in the Middle Ages it was used as a narcotic during operations.”

“A sedative,” Bob said. “Repta could have added it to the tea.”

“—And that’s also how he regularly sends the countess to sleep,” Pete surmised. “When we found her in her brother’s room, there was an empty teacup on the table next to her chair, remember? It’s also clear to me why Repta is doing this—for him to search for the entrance to the crypt undisturbed.”

“Quite possible,” Jupiter admitted.

“I’m sure that’s what he’s doing,” Pete said, “but we will spoil things for him.”

Jupiter raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Why the sudden change of heart, Pete?”

“If Repta hadn’t caught us, I wouldn’t have got into trouble with my dad. Let’s just say I have a score to settle with him.” Pete looked grimly up at the walls of the castle. For a moment, he thought he perceived movement behind a window. “Fellas,” he whispered. “I think we’re being watched.”

Bob followed his gaze, but saw nothing more. “Was the countess standing at the window again?”

“Yes, I think it was her,” Pete said.

“She’s watched us before when we were trying out the bat-bot.”

“Oh?” Pete remarked. “Why do you think she did that?”

Bob shrugged his shoulders.

“Strange,” Jupiter murmured as they walked back to the castle.

9. Pete Gives Chase

The squeaking of their room door seemed unusually loud to The Three Investigators as they stepped out into the corridor that night. The castle was silent. The movie people were fast asleep.

Quietly, Jupiter, Pete and Bob crept to the corridor that led into the west wing. Bob unfolded the floor plan to make sure once again that they were in the right place. "It should be right here," he murmured.

"But there's nothing here..." Pete whispered, "just a wall. Are you sure this is the right floor plan?"

"How many Piatră Castles do you know?" asked Bob. "Of course this is the right layout. Look at the corridor here, the intersection there, the tower—they are all correct... only that there is no passageway here."

"I could have told you that earlier," Jupiter said. "I was here yesterday."

"Ah, and what does the First Investigator intend to do now?" asked Pete sullenly.

Jupiter did not answer, but rummaged in his backpack, took out a small device and switched it on. He directed its violet glow onto the floor. The stone slabs shone in a white-blue light.

Bob frowned. "The UV lamp from the movie set?"

"You dusted the floor with fluorescent powder," Pete realized and looked at Juve in amazement. "You can't be serious."

"Works great after all," the First Investigator remarked, "better than I thought, if I'm honest. Look, there are footprints."

However, Pete didn't have an eye for footprints right now. "Tell me, are you crazy? Now you're stealing from my dad too?"

"I borrowed it, Pete," Jupiter countered. "There's a big difference."

"Oh, yeah?" Pete countered. "Who did you borrow it from?"

"I'm gonna return it before anyone notices," Juve argued.

"You have already used some of the powder, so how are you going to return it?"

"I don't understand the fuss. You said yourself this afternoon that you had a score to settle. Do you want to clear up the mystery of Piatră Castle or not?"

"But not like that!" Pete snapped.

Jupiter switched off the UV lamp. The footprints became invisible. "How then, Pete?"

"You can't just take my dad's equipment. You should have asked me."

"Then you would have said 'no' and we could not have achieved anything. Without this..."—he switched the lamp back on and the footprints lit up again—"our investigation would be over."

"Give me back the powder now!" demanded Pete.

Shaking his head, Jupiter pulled the sachet of powder out of his backpack and pressed it into Pete's hand. "Can we get down to business now?"

Aiming the beam of the lamp at the ground, The Three Investigators followed the trail. It became fainter the further away they got, but fortunately it was still clear enough to see. The trail led into a narrow side passage and straight to a wooden door.

"It's locked," Bob noted.

Jupiter looked at Pete and grinned wryly. "Now if we had a lock pick..."

Picking locks was the Second Investigator's speciality. To learn this skill, he had practised on countless cupboards, doors and padlocks in the salvage yard and was now very good at it. He almost always had his lock pick set with him. Smiling, he pulled it out of his pocket and handed it to Jupiter.

The First Investigator gulped, accepted the lock picks, selected one and tried his luck.

Pete let him poke around unsuccessfully in the door lock for a minute before saying: "It's too small."

Jupiter tried the next bigger one, but it didn't work as well. He sighed. "Now if we had someone who could do this..."

"—That would be great, wouldn't it?" Pete's smile widened.

Jupiter nodded.

"Well..." Pete turned away and faced Bob.

"Please," Bob said, looking at Pete pleadingly.

Pete rolled his eyes, snatched the lock picks from Jupiter's hand and set to work. After a few seconds, an auspicious click sounded. "Fingertip feeling, Jupe, but then, any sort of feeling is alien to you." Pete pushed down the handle. The door swung open.

They entered a small, sparsely furnished chamber. A huge cupboard stood against one wall, and a bedstead without a mattress against another. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling and in the narrow window alcove.

"In any case, this is not a crypt," Pete remarked.

Jupiter first shone the UV light on the floor and then to the cupboard. Triumphantly, he yanked open the door of the cupboard. Two rusty coat hangers made of bent wire were swinging on the bar, otherwise the cupboard was empty. "Turn everything upside down," Jupiter instructed his friends.

"Gladly." Bob looked around. "If you tell us exactly what to turn because there's nothing here." He looked under the bed and there was nothing as well. "No crypt."

Perplexed, they walked along the walls. Sand crunched under their soles.

"Sand?" muttered Jupiter, shining the light from his mobile phone on the floor. The sand was everywhere, and there was even a small pile of it right next to the cupboard. Jupiter put his mobile phone away and told his friends: "Come on, help me push the cupboard aside."

They braced themselves against the cupboard and pushed. It started to move with a creak.

Finally they had pushed the cupboard far enough away. Behind it was a roughly round opening in the wall from which a breath of cold air blew towards them.

"Jupe!" gasped Bob. "We found it!"

"I never doubted it."

Pete was seized by a shiver, probably because of the cold air, but he still wondered what had actually prompted him to go on this night adventure. The idea of exposing Repta and getting back at him in this way suddenly seemed ridiculous to him.

The Three Investigators shone their mobile phone lights into the dark hole.

"This discovery definitely explains the knocking noises. Look!" Bob pointed to a bucket of rubble that was on the other side next to the hole. In it were a hammer and a chisel. "The wall is almost 30 centimetres thick. No wonder it took several nights to break through it."

"Okay," Pete said in mock cheerfulness. "We found the entrance to the crypt. Mission accomplished. Congratulations, fellas. Phew, it's so late already and I'm kind of tired. Can we go now?"

“Don’t be silly, Pete,” Jupe said. “Firstly, our mission was not to find the entrance to the crypt, but to prevent whomever might be looking for Vlad’s heirloom.”

“Yes, but—”

“—And secondly, this is not the entrance to the crypt.”

“No?”

“No, look! Behind the hole is just a dark passage, and we’re going to check it out now.”

“But—”

Jupiter did not let the Second Investigator get a word in edgeways and climbed through the hole in the wall.

The passageway was much higher and wider than the corridors they knew in the castle. There was no electric lighting, only the light from their mobile phones cut through the darkness. Columns rose at regular intervals on the walls, supporting the high ceiling.

“What if we run into Repta now?” whispered Pete.

“Out of the question,” Jupiter replied.

“Oh, and why is that so?”

“Because the cupboard was covering the hole, Pete,” Jupe explained. “If Repta or whoever is in here now, who would have covered the hole with the cupboard?”

The end of the passageway came into view in the form of a solid iron-barred door under a round arch. Above it, the ghastly grimace of a stone dragon protruded from the wall. Cobwebs hung down from its horns and from its gaping mouth. Its wings spanned the length of the wall.

When Pete looked at the dragon’s head, he flinched. “Do you see that?” he whispered. “The dragon is guarding the door.”

“Vlad Drăculea, the son of the dragon,” said Jupiter. “This, my dear Pete, is the entrance to the crypt.”

10. Cross-Examining the Suspect

Jupiter put down his backpack, stepped closer to the door and touched it gently with his fingertips. The forged fittings formed a cross from which flames seemed to emanate.

“How do you open it?” asked Bob. “There’s no door handle and no keyhole either.”

“Yes,” Jupiter agreed, “but there is this...” His fingers traced over a circular indentation right at the centre of the door. The jagged circle enclosed another cross-shaped indentation. It looked like something was missing from this spot. “I suspect that this is a locking mechanism. You just need the right key.”

Pete and Bob didn’t get a chance to look at it, because suddenly a red light flashed. It moved in waves through the corridor.

“What’s that light?” cried Pete, looking around in panic. “Where did the light come from?”

“There!” The First Investigator pointed to a circling lamp hidden in an alcove beside one of the columns. “A silent alarm. Ingenious.”

“What alarm?” Pete looked at him uncomprehendingly.

“An alarm that you can’t hear and one that is probably triggered by a motion sensor,” Jupe said.

“—And the sensor should be somewhere in the corridor to the west wing,” Bob realized. “I’m sure the culprit used the same system when he was knocking the hole in the wall. That’s why the knocking stopped every time someone approached.”

Pete gulped. “That means that—”

“—Someone is coming,” Jupiter finished the sentence.

“Hide!” hissed Bob. He had already taken cover behind one of the columns. Pete and Jupiter did the same.

It was not a second too soon, because at the other end of the passageway, a dark figure with a flashlight was already climbing through the hole. He wore a hood and his face could not be seen.

Slowly the figure came closer. The beam of light wandered over the columns and then to the door of the crypt... before settling on the backpack that Jupiter had left behind.

Instantly, the figure switched off his flashlight, turned on his heel and ran away.

“I’ll get him!” Pete hissed and took up pursuit. He ran after the figure along the passageway, through the hole into the chamber, and then out to the corridor.

The hooded figure was fast, but so was Pete. As they ran through the corridors, Pete was able to close the distance bit by bit. He reached out and almost got hold of the hood.

Suddenly, the fugitive slipped into a side passage and extended the lead.

As he ran, the Second Investigator pulled the bag with the fluorescent powder out of his jacket pocket. He tore a hole in the packet, grabbed a small handful of the powder and hurled it at the fugitive. There was a spatter of powder on the fugitive’s clothing. Pete stumbled as a result of the action. He tripped over the edge of a carpet and staggered on. Only with difficulty could he save himself from hitting the wall.

The hooded figure! Where was he? At the crucial moment, Pete had not noticed whether the figure had run to the left or to the right.

Pete tried his luck, sprinted around the corner to the right—and collided with a man who gasped in amazement and just managed not to drop his teacup.

“Pete? What on earth are you doing here in the middle of the night? You should be in bed by now!”

“Dad!” the Second Investigator cried in horror and looked around searchingly. He peered past his father, but the hooded figure had disappeared. “Have you seen him?”

“Seen who?”

At that moment, Bob and Jupiter came running.

“Where is he?” asked Bob, panting, while Jupiter could only prop himself up on his thighs and catch his breath.

“I lost him!” Pete kicked at the carpet that had almost brought him down.

“Lost who?” asked Mr Crenshaw indignantly. “Why aren’t you in your room? What’s going on here—”

Pete noticed the teacup in his father’s hand. “Don’t drink it!” Pete tried to stop his father from taking a sip but accidentally knocked the cup. It dropped to the carpet and broke with a clink.

Mr Crenshaw looked from one boy to the next, stunned. “Have you completely lost your minds?”

“The tea is doped,” Pete said.

“Doped? I just took this tea from the kitchen myself. Are you guys at it again? I thought we had settled with the investigation games!”

“These are not games, Dad,” Pete affirmed.

Bob nodded. “There is some circumstantial evidence to suggest... uh...” He suddenly realized that without evidence he had better not tell Mr Crenshaw about their suspicions regarding Repta’s machinations. Bob looked to Jupiter for help, but the First Investigator was still gasping for breath.

“Repta is doping the countess with the tea so that he can steal Vlad’s heirloom unhindered,” Pete blurted out.

Bob and Jupiter looked at Pete in horror.

“Of course,” said Mr Crenshaw, nodding in mock understanding. “So now it’s the old caretaker who’s plotting against the countess.”

Jupiter raised an index finger and started to say something, but again Pete was quicker. “We found a whole bed of mandrakes—in the castle garden very close to his cottage. The plants can be made into a sleeping potion. We drank the tea ourselves and immediately fell into a deep sleep.”

“So Mr Repta is also to blame for you being late for work this morning, huh? Very elegantly solved, I must say.”

“That’s not all, we also have him on video.”

“You filmed him?”

“Not really,” Bob intervened, giving Pete a shake of the head. “Basically, we—”

“We have enough evidence to expose him, Dad,” Pete took over. “Besides, we have made a discovery—”

“Yes! We did it!” Jupiter interrupted him. “We have made a discovery. Well, what I mean is that we have discovered the culprit—”

Pete glared angrily at the First Investigator. “What are you doing, Juve? Why—”

“We’ll sort that out later,” Jupiter hissed and elbowed Pete in the side.

“We’ll sort it out now! Repta ran away from us! Why? Because he’s the bad guy, plain and simple.” Pleadingly, he looked at his father. “Dad, after all, the countess’s health is at

stake here. Repta mixes something in her tea, for sure!"

Mr Crenshaw eyed The Three Investigators long and hard. "You're right, Pete," he finally said. "We'll sort this out now, not later. Follow me."

"Where... where are we going?" asked Bob in confusion.

"Well, where else? To the bad guy."

The caretaker's cottage was not their first stop. Earlier, Mr Crenshaw led them through the castle to one of the guest rooms. Bob winced when he realized whose door it was that Pete's father was knocking on in the middle of the night.

It took a moment for Luciana Ionescu to open the door. She had thrown on a dressing gown, her hair was dishevelled and she looked as if she had just woken up from a deep sleep.

"Yes?" she asked, puzzled, when she recognized the unexpected visitors.

"I'm so sorry to bother you, Luciana, but I need your help as an interpreter," Mr Crenshaw said.

She looked at him blankly in confusion. "Of course, of course, but can't it wait until the morning?"

"I fear that by then, these boys might have put the whole castle on alert... or put someone behind bars." Mr Crenshaw tried an apologetic smile. "I believe it shouldn't take long."

Five minutes later, they had left the castle and were standing in front of Repta's cottage.

Van Helsing was already barking before they knocked. They heard irritated murmuring. After Repta had calmed the dog, he opened the door and looked questioningly around. He didn't seem to have been to bed yet, because he was wearing his normal work clothes.

Luciana said something to him in Romanian and then explained: "I told him that you have some urgent questions for him, but I didn't know what they are about."

Mr Crenshaw nodded. "We'll now sort that out together."

Repta let them enter. The cottage's furnishings looked as if they hadn't changed in the last fifty years. Everything was a little worn, the pots standing on the cooker were dented and the seat cushions on the sturdy wooden chairs had holes in them. On a sideboard stood an antique radio.

Repta asked the visitors to take a seat at the table. Then he put on a kettle of water and calmly began to fill his tobacco pipe while Mr Crenshaw hesitantly recited the accusations against him, which Luciana interpreted just as hesitantly.

The Three Investigators had no idea how the questions were phrased by Luciana and how the accusations were received by Repta. The caretaker did not make a face while he listened to everything calmly and poured the tea. He pointed to the pot and looked questioningly around.

Everyone shook their heads in agreement.

Shrugging his shoulders, Repta poured himself a cup and lit the pipe. When thin threads of smoke finally curled up from the pipe bowl, Repta began to narrate slowly and calmly. The Three Investigators and Mr Crenshaw had to wait for Luciana's interpretation.

"He says the countess has suffered from a severe sleeping disorder since her brother went missing and can only get a wink of sleep with tea. Harvesting mandrakes and processing the roots into a sleeping tea have always been among his tasks."

Repta nodded, because he could guess what Luciana had said, and pointed to the worktop next to the sink, where the freshly dug mandrake roots lay on a chequered kitchen towel. Repta had cleaned them of dirt and soil and spread them out to dry. His explanation sounded impressively logical... too logical perhaps?

“And what about the nightly walks through the castle?” asked Jupiter.

Luciana interpreted, Repta replied, Luciana interpreted back.

“For some time now, unexplained knocking noises have been heard in the castle at night. Perhaps you have also noticed them. Countess Codrina cannot explain where the noises come from, but they frighten her employees. Her housekeeper Bianca even believed that Vlad had returned, and as a result she quit without notice. You must have noticed that the day you arrived.

“In any case, the countess asked Mr Repta to investigate the noises, and since they only occur at night, he has to walk around the castle when everyone else is asleep.” Luciana smiled in amusement. “By the way, he doesn’t suspect the return of an undead so much as a defective heating pipe. The heating system of the castle urgently needs to be renewed.”

“Oh, and why is he now in his cottage here instead of tracking down the defective heating pipe?”

“Pete...” Mr Crenshaw gave him a warning look.

“Why? He doesn’t understand me anyway,” he replied defiantly.

Luciana interpreted and listened to what Repta had to say. Then she laughed. “He’s not that young anymore and the movie crew keeps him pretty busy—with all the power cuts... He needed a night off tonight.”

Pete’s eyes narrowed. He reached for Jupiter’s backpack and pulled out the UV lamp. “Then how do you explain this?” He shone the lamp in Repta’s face.

“Pete!” cried Mr Crenshaw, startled. “Stop that at once!”

The Second Investigator let the light beam wander over Repta’s clothes. His jacket was hanging on the wall behind him and Pete pointed the lamp at it too... but there was nothing. Nowhere did the tell-tale fluorescent powder Pete had thrown at the fleeing figure light up. There was just a few white fluffs.

“—But that can’t be,” Pete gasped. “I’m sure Repta is looking for Vlad’s heirloom!”

Luciana looked questioningly around. “—But there is no heirloom. I explained that to you, Bob.”

Bob could only shrug his shoulders apologetically.

Mr Crenshaw cleared his throat loudly. “I think we have heard enough. Mr Repta, I’m really, really sorry. I don’t know what got into these boys. They’re...” He raised his hands helplessly as Luciana interpreted.

“It won’t happen again,” Mr Crenshaw continued, “I promise. Please forgive the inconvenience and the late intrusion... and you as well, Luciana.”

Repta smirked vaguely. He took a relaxed drag on his pipe, looked at the rising smoke and replied in Romanian.

“Children’s imagination knows no bounds,” Luciana interpreted. “He himself used to be the same... but with age, you lose that at some point.”

Mr Crenshaw nodded. He felt relieved with Repta’s understanding. He stood up. The Three Investigators also rose from their chairs.

“Have a good night then,” Mr Crenshaw said.

They left Repta’s cottage. When Jupiter turned around a few metres away, Repta was watching them from the entrance. He smiled.

11. Friendship in Turmoil

A little later, the three boys were back in their room.

Mr Crenshaw stood at the door and eyed them sternly, while The Three Investigators kept their heads down. “—And now for you three... When I came up with the idea of bringing you here as interns, I thought I could rely on you. I thought you would be sensible enough by now to separate fantasy from reality... but Mr Repta got to the point—children’s imagination knows no bounds.

“It’s just that with you kids, I sometimes get the impression that you do it on purpose. It is not your imagination that runs away with you. You’re really obsessed with investigation games. You want to see a conspiracy around every corner, and at the same time, you want to be taken seriously by adults.” He shook his head. “It doesn’t work like that. You finally have to take responsibility. Everything you do will have consequences. So from now on, there is only the internship for you. One more misstep and you’re on the next plane home. Do we understand each other?”

The three boys nodded silently.

Mr Crenshaw held out his hand. “The powder,” he said, “and the lamp.” He twitched his fingers impatiently.

Dejectedly, Pete handed him both items and Mr Crenshaw left the room without another word.

The Second Investigator dropped onto his bed, head hanging, while Bob kicked his travel bag in frustration. Jupiter, on the other hand, began to walk slowly up and down the room while his index finger played on his lower lip.

“That was... devastating,” Bob murmured softly.

Jupe nodded. “Indeed. The hooded figure was way too fast while fleeing, so we should have realized that he couldn’t be Repta. Thanks to Pete’s fluorescent powder attack, we have the proof. Our theories about the knocking noises and the crypt have not wavered, but the search for the culprit is proving difficult after this setback.”

Bob and Pete stared speechlessly at the First Investigator.

Jupiter didn’t seem to notice and continued: “We should think everything through thoroughly and go to the crypt again tomorrow—”

“I’m fed up,” Pete interrupted him. “You’re acting like we didn’t just get the roasting of a lifetime. Were you not there, or what? I don’t want to hear about that crypt ever again. Do you hear me?”

Jupiter rose to reply, but Pete wasn’t finished: “—And then you have the audacity to lie to my dad too.”

“There is a significant difference between lying and not telling everything you know. I was merely trying to prevent outside interference from obstructing our investigation.”

“Jupe, leave me alone with your turgid ramblings,” Pete snapped.

Jupiter did not allow himself to be muzzled. “You’ve got us in a real fix, Pete. Every good investigator knows that you don’t hurl accusations without solid evidence... and then you almost blurted out the discovery of the crypt entrance.”

“We’re doing an internship here,” Pete said, “and nothing else.”

Jupiter sighed. "Pete... we are The Three Investigators and we investigate—"

"We are not investigating anything here. Dad is absolutely right. We're children, not investigators."

"—But still friends," Bob eventually spoke up after listening to the argument in frustration. "—So stop this mindless bickering."

"The only one who is mindless is Jupe and I'll tell you why—" Pete countered, "because he couldn't care less what we think. He does his thing, regardless of the consequences. If he gets into trouble, then it's on him. I don't want to be a part of it."

"Let me tell you this, Jupiter Jones. This investigation business of ours started off as a hobby. It was fine in the beginning. We help people by solving mysteries and secrets, and we were and still very successful. However, as time went on, this became an obsession of yours. What do you want? You only want to boost your ego. You want to prove to the world that you are super-intelligent. That's all to it, isn't it. So what if you are a mastermind?"

Bob wanted to stop Pete's rant, but he too, realized that what Pete was saying was true.

Pete continued: "You know what I think, Jupiter Jones? All other normal friends of mine have various hobbies and interests. You, on the other hand, have no life outside of this investigation business. You are a narcissist. You are arrogant and selfish, always only thinking about yourself and your obsession. Only your opinion counts and you always want to win at all costs. You don't care how others feel. On the contrary, I do, and now I am in trouble with my dad..." He then paused for a while. "Say something, Bob!"

Bob shook his head. "Imagine that I was really looking forward to this trip here with you two."

Those were the last words spoken in the room of The Three Investigators that night. Bob lay down in bed and turned his back on the two squabblers. Pete and Jupiter remained silent. At some point, the light was turned off.

All three brooded silently. At first it seemed impossible that even one of them would find sleep. Finally, calm and steady breaths filled the room.

Only Jupiter was not asleep. The First Investigator tossed and turned in his bed until the bedspread was soaked through with sweat.

It wasn't the first time Pete had accused him of always doing his thing as if he didn't care what happened to his friends... but to him, it wasn't like that at all. It was just a mystery to him why Pete didn't care so much about investigation work. When they had started their investigation business, Pete had been on fire. However, whenever things got a little scary or dicey, he backed out. Jupiter couldn't understand how anyone could leave an unsolved mystery to the side just because there might be a bit of trouble. The trouble would go away, but the mystery would remain unsolved forever if The Three Investigators did not make an effort to solve it. How could Pete just go along with the view that there was no crypt out there, no lost heirloom, and no mysterious dark figure?

Jupiter listened to Pete's quiet breathing and suddenly couldn't stand it anymore. He threw back the bedspread, slipped on his shoes and quietly slipped out of the room.

Aimlessly, he roamed the castle. However, he dismissed the idea of returning to the entrance of the crypt. The hooded figure would not take the risk of showing his face there again today... and as long as Jupiter didn't know how to open the door, it was pointless to try.

Unconsciously, his path led him to the dining room. Food helped him to think—at least for him. It had something to do with blood sugar level.

The dining room was empty and clean. There was no food lying around anywhere, but Jupiter didn't dare go into the adjoining kitchen. If he was caught eating the movie crew's

breakfast, Mr Crenshaw would probably put him on the next plane to California. At least there was one last chocolate bar in the snack bowl near the door. Jupiter grabbed it and took a bite.

The sound of his own chewing was mingled with distant murmurs. Jupe paused. Someone was approaching from the corridor! Hastily, the First Investigator took cover under the table.

A long shadow fell through the open door—a shadow with a grotesquely large and deformed head. It was the vampire zombie!

The hairs on the back of Jupiter's neck stood up. He ducked lower as the shadow came closer and closer. Suddenly the First Investigator was no longer so sure that there was a logical explanation for the vampire zombie. What if Pete was right? What if...

Jupiter stumbled. The murmur of the shadow had become more intelligible: "*Dominus vobiscum; Et cum spiritu tuo...*"

They were the same words that the vampire zombie had spoken to himself two nights ago. However, this time Jupiter recognized the voice. Cautiously, he peered over the edge of the table.

The figure casting the frightening shadow entered the dining room. Still standing in the entrance, he pulled the headphones from his ears and his shadow suddenly looked completely normal. The grotesquely deformed head had merely been the shadow of the headphones.

"*Sit nomen Domini be... be... Sit nomen Domini be... Damn!*" Steven Yates peered into a stapled-together stack of papers and at the same time, he reached into the snack bowl, lost in thought.

The bowl was empty. Yates puffed furiously and repeated: "*Sit nomen Domini be...* Yeah, can you believe it?"

"*Sit nomen Domini benedictum,*" said Jupiter, leaving his hiding place under the table. "*Ex hoc nunc et usque in sæculum.*"

Yates flinched and let out a small cry. Then he recognized Jupiter. "What are you doing here?"

"Mr Yates—the vampire zombie. How very interesting."

Exasperated, Yates shook his head. "The what? What are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

"Thinking, I guess," Jupiter said with a shrug.

"You belong in bed, boy. March, march!"

"What about you?"

"Now don't get cheeky with me."

"That was not my intention," Jupe clarified. "I merely wanted to point out what we have in common—insomnia. The difficulties you are having with learning the lines for your scene seem to be keeping you awake."

"What part of 'don't get cheeky' didn't you understand, you little pain in the butt? And how do you even know my lines?"

"I have been an unwilling witness to your attempts at reciting this repeatedly."

"Excuse me?"

"You were muttering those Latin phrases to yourself the other night."

"And you remembered them right then?" asked Yates, stunned.

"Just a little memory training. I'll tell you something. When I was little, I was in a TV series. I couldn't even read, but I had to learn a lot of lines. I had a trick for that."

"Uh-huh. Great. How nice for you." Yates shook his head and demonstratively looked at his script again. "I'd have to get on with this, then. Go to sleep."

Again Jupiter shrugged his shoulders and headed for the door.

“What kind of trick was that?” asked Yates abruptly when Jupiter was almost out.

The First Investigator paused and slowly turned around. “Music,” he explained. “Have you ever noticed that it is much easier to remember the lyrics of a song than a poem? That’s because music creates an associative network in the brain. So I sang the lines.”

Yates seemed to suppress a smirk. “How old were you when you came up with the associative network? Five?”

Jupiter let the mockery bounce off him. “*Sit nomen Domini benedictum*,” he sang to a simple tune. “Besides, there are studies that show that eating dark chocolate improves memory.” He put the half chocolate bar on the table, nodded to Yates and left the hall.

Outside in the corridor, he heard Steven Yates singing softly: “*Sit nomen Domini benedictum...*”

12. The Dragon Medallion

The next morning, The Three Investigators did not meet until breakfast.

Jupiter had intentionally stayed in bed longer so that he wouldn't have to talk to Bob and Pete in their room. The Second Investigator had countered his words at every opportunity but Jupiter didn't see the point in putting a good face on the matter and pretending that nothing was wrong.

The First Investigator was still very interested in solving this case. It was more important to him than the internship. If Pete and Bob saw it differently, he would continue alone, and he would also bear the consequences alone if something went wrong. In the end, there was nothing he could do about Mr Crenshaw's disregard of the situation.

In the dining room, the First Investigator deliberately sat down one table away and barely looked up from his breakfast. Out of the corner of his eye, however, he noticed Bob's glances. Pete, on the other hand, took as much trouble as Jupiter himself not to look in the other's direction.

The strenuous conflict between those two was interrupted when two men whom The Three Investigators had never seen before, appeared in the doorway to the dining room. Both wore black suits and looked sternly over the crowd. The younger of the two was a tall, well-toned man who looked like a bodyguard. The older one looked more like a bank manager. He carried a mysterious-looking suitcase in his hand. The two were accompanied by Luciana, who spoke to them in Romanian.

When Annabeth Parker, who was sitting one table away, noticed the visitors, she jumped up and went to the two gentlemen. Luciana interpreted the conversation and the four left the room.

A little later, Annabeth returned and rounded up the entire crew in the dining room. The two men in suits and Luciana were also back.

"May I have your attention," Annabeth said. She didn't have to raise her voice. It immediately became quiet in the dining room. "This is Mr Dragus, the director of the local historical museum, and Mr Varga, one of his security staff.

"After long negotiations and thanks to Luciana's invaluable help, we've managed to get the museum to let us use the original medallion of the Order of the Dragon for the filming." She pointed to the black case, the handle of which Mr Dragus still clutched tightly, as if it were fused to him.

"Six hundred years ago, this medallion was the distinguishing insignia of the members of the Order. I don't need to mention that this is the only known piece in existence. Mr Varga will always be present during the filming and will take care of the medallion. In the evening, it will be kept in a safe in the tower chamber of the east wing and guarded."

Varga looked just as grim as the director and instilled respect in everyone.

"The medallion is at our disposal for the next three days, so let's make the most of it."

Everyone clapped. Mr Dragus and Mr Varga did not make a face.

After that, the crew got to work as usual. The Three Investigators were assigned to make final preparations for the cross prop that was to be used today. The fake blood had to flow out of the hidden holes at the right time in the right quantity and it had to look real.

The greatest difficulty, however, was working together without talking to each other. When Jupiter wanted to hand the Second Investigator a pair of goggles before the last blood splatter test, Pete simply turned away. Bob gave him an apologetic look, as if it was his fault that Pete was behaving impossibly. Jupiter could only just pull himself together not to just throw the goggles at Pete's feet. Instead, he gently placed them on the table and left.

As the start of today's filming approached, the tension among the crew members was clearly noticeable. An important key scene was to be shot featuring Vlad Drăculea returning from the dead to mourn his deceased lover and subsequently renouncing his faith. Also in this scene, the valuable dragon medallion would be used.

To make matters worse, Countess Codrina entered the hall at that moment. Although she remained in the background, her presence radiated to the whole team.

Steven Yates and Betty were powdered one last time. Only now did the security guard bring the museum director's secured case into the hall, lay it on a table and open it. Jupiter thought he saw Annabeth's eyes sparkle when she saw the dragon medallion for the first time, but the countess's reaction did not escape him either. When she saw the medallion, she sucked in a sharp breath and almost left the hall in a hurry.

"Did you notice that?" Jupiter whispered to Pete, who was standing next to him. However, Pete pretended not to have heard him.

A little later, everyone was ready.

"Quiet on the set please!" the assistant director shouted.

"Roll camera..." Annabeth called out.

A few seconds later, the camera operator replied: "Camera rolling."

"Roll sound..."

"Sound rolling," replied the sound engineer.

Annabeth took a quick breath. "—And... action!"

In a chapel lit only by candles, Betty alias Elisabeta lay on a stone altar. She was pale and lifeless. Next to her stood a priest with a grey beard that reached down to his chest. He was muttering prayers to himself. Behind this set-up stood the mighty stone cross.

The door flew open and Steven Yates alias Vlad Drăculea rushed in, clad in cloaked armour. With a look of despair, he went down on one knee before Elisabeta and placed the dragon medallion in her open hands. The cautiousness with which he did this was probably not an act.

"*Dominus vobiscum,*" said the priest. "*Et cum spiritu tuo. Sit—*"

"—*Sit nomen Domini benedictum!*" Yates shouted angrily and stormed towards the priest. "*Ex hoc nunc et usque in sæculum!*" he continued, not faltering once. With a great, powerful movement, he drew his sword.

The priest staggered back fearfully, stumbled and fell to the ground. "This is the house of God!" he implored Vlad.

Vlad raised the mighty sword above his head and rammed it full force into the cross.

Blood poured out of the stone and flowed over the blade of the sword and finally over Vlad's hands. Then Vlad tilted his head back and raged at the sky.

"Cut!" exclaimed Annabeth. "Thank you. That's all there is to it. Great, Steven. That went really well. In a minute, we can change to the next shot—a close-up of Betty's hands with the medallion. The rest of the props can be taken down."

Yates could see his relief.

Jupiter smiled to himself and went to the other crew members to help with the dismantling. As he did so, his eyes fell on the preview monitor showing what the camera was capturing. It was hovering on a crane towards Betty's hands and captured the dragon

medallion in close-up. The medallion consisted of a cross surrounded by a jagged circle. Only at second glance did he realize that the jagged circle represented the tail of a huddled dragon.

Jupiter froze and could not take his eyes off the monitor. Yes, there was no doubt, and the First Investigator would certainly have noticed it earlier if he had seen the medallion up close.

“Are you all right?” asked Bob, who had noticed Jupiter’s stare.

“Bob,” he whispered. “Do you see that?”

“What do you want me to see?”

“The medallion. Don’t you recognize it?”

“Recognize it? It’s the dragon medallion. We know that.”

“You’ve seen it before! At least its outline.” Jupiter was all excited. “Look closely!”

Bob shook his head in perplexity.

“The cross with the jagged circle matches the indentation in the door of the crypt.”

“Are you sure?” Bob looked closer.

“Absolutely! The medallion is the key!”

“—But that would be a blatant coincidence.”

“It can’t be!” Jupiter pulled Bob a little away from the monitor. “It’s not a coincidence. Someone must have known that the medallion would come to the castle sooner or later.

That’s why the hole was knocked into the wall—to expose the entrance to the crypt when the key to open it finally arrives.”

Bob shook his head. “Who would have known that? If it’s really true, then only someone from the movie crew would—”

Jupiter put his finger to his lips and nudged Bob to look over to one side of the hall where there was a small gathering of the crew members—Steven Yates, Betty Rider, Hank Meyers, and Annabeth Parker.

“Hey, guys!” shouted Mr Crenshaw gruffly. “Do you need a written invitation? The floor won’t mop itself!”

Pete was already wiping the fake blood that had splattered from the cross off the stone floor. He gave them a dark look.

Bob sighed. “Sorry, Jupe, but we’ve got enough trouble as it is.”

“But—”

“We can keep our eyes open,” Bob suggested, “but no more reckless nocturnal actions, okay?”

While Bob went over to Pete to help him, Jupiter slumped his shoulders in disappointment. ‘Keep our eyes open’—as if a case had ever been solved that way.

Again Jupiter looked at the monitor, which still showed the dragon medallion. “No... keeping our eyes open is not enough.”

“On three... One, two, three!” Pete and Bob lifted the coffin up and positioned it on a heavy-duty dolly in order to take it back to the temporary Wonderland storage area in the east wing.

It was quite a journey to manoeuvre the coffin along narrow corridors, taking care not to bump into anything. Moreover, there were a number of staircases along the way so they had to carry the coffin to another level.

While Bob groaned and panted, Pete hardly noticed the effort. The whole time his thoughts were on Jupiter, their argument, and what Jupiter had discovered on the preview monitor—after Bob had told him about it earlier.

“Do you actually believe that?” Pete asked Bob as they wheeled the coffin along a straight stretch of a corridor. “—That someone from the movie crew wants to get into the

crypt, I mean.”

“I don’t know,” Bob said. “It would make sense, wouldn’t it? But I really can’t imagine who would be behind it.”

“Maybe Yates?” pondered Pete. “I find him suspicious.”

“That doesn’t make him a criminal. Say, I thought you weren’t interested in this case anymore, and now all of a sudden you are? Be careful in case Jupe finds out.”

“Talking about Jupe,” Pete snorted contemptuously, “where is he anyway? Why are we lugging this heavy coffin halfway across the castle and he’s conveniently not around?”

“Because he’s busy with something else right now.” Bob nodded towards a window through which he had just spotted the First Investigator.

Pete stopped so abruptly that it startled Bob. “No sudden manoeuvres, please,” Bob complained.

“What’s he doing there?” Pete looked suspiciously out of the window.

Outside on the grassed area of the moat where the first bat-bot test flight had taken place, Jupiter Jones stood looking through binoculars up at the walls of the east-wing tower. In his other hand he held a piece of paper that from afar looked like the layout of Piatra Castle.

“He’s spying on the castle,” Pete suggested.

Bob shook his head. “Nonsense. He can move around here freely. Why would he spy on the castle?”

“I don’t know. I just know he’s doing it, and he’s up to something.”

Impatiently, Bob pulled at the coffin. “Can we go on now?”

After the two had finally brought the coffin to its destination, they returned to the set. Jupiter had also returned to the Knight’s Hall where the crew was assembling a new set-up. In the meantime, the actors were having a break while they waited for their next scene.

The First Investigator was chatting with Betty. From a distance, Pete watched Jupiter hold his mobile phone under her nose. Betty took a deep breath and let out a sharp scream. All the bystanders flinched and turned to her in confusion.

“Instead of a selfie,” Jupiter explained with a laugh, holding up his mobile phone. “Screams from the Scream Queen.”

Betty seemed to enjoy it and she shouted some more: “No! Help! Oh, please, no!”

“Instead of a selfie,” Pete repeated sceptically. “Who’s going to believe that? Jupe isn’t interested in actor’s souvenirs. When Yates offered him a selfie on the first day, he had even claimed his phone battery was dead.”

“Maybe he’s testing her somehow,” Bob suggested. “After all, Betty is on the list of suspects.”

“By making her scream into his mobile phone?” Pete shook his head decisively. “Jupe is definitely up to something.”

“Are you the one who smells conspiracies now? Come on, Pete, the coffin won’t move by itself.”

“What coffin? We just took it away.”

“That was the first. There is a second one here. You’re really not in the game at all, are you? Jupe and you... In this respect, you two are really very similar.”

“Similar?” Pete looked downright shocked.

“Yes—in your doggedness. Now get a grip.”

Together they lifted coffin number two. Betty had finished screaming in the meantime and Jupiter strolled with a cloth bag in his hand to the back corner of the hall where the people from the make-up had their work area.

“There!” hissed Pete excitedly. “Bob, did you see that?”

“See what?” growled Bob, annoyed. “Come on, Pete, if you keep stopping we’ll never finish.”

“Jupe stole a hair dryer.”

“Jupe did what?”

“There was a hair dryer on the table. Jupe swiped it into his cloth bag.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I’m not crazy.”

“Maybe he’s about to take a shower.”

“Nonsense, as if he’d ever blow-dried his hair. You’re not taking me seriously. I swear to you—Jupe is up to something!”

“If you say that one more time, you can move the coffin by yourself.”

They had another hour of free time before dinner. Pete lay on his bed and kept throwing his tennis ball against the wall while brooding dully to himself. Jupiter was loitering somewhere in the castle, pursuing his own plans. Earlier, Pete had seen him tinkering with the bat-bot with Hank. What was he up to?

Bob couldn’t stand either the First or the Second Investigator right now. The two of them got on his nerves in equal measure and he was tired of playing the peacemaker all the time. At least for an hour, he didn’t want to see or hear anything from either of them... so he took flight.

13. Jupiter is Up to Something

Bob wandered aimlessly through the castle. He had thought he knew his way around by now, but suddenly he found himself in a part of the castle that was foreign to him. He must have taken a wrong turn.

Bob turned a corner into a deserted corridor—and flinched when he caught sight of Countess Codrina. She was sitting in a window alcove with her legs drawn up like a schoolgirl. She had a book on her lap and Bob recognized what it was—the Romanian edition of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

The countess was also startled, stretched her legs and unexpectedly swung herself nimbly out of the alcove. “*Ce faci aici?* I mean, what are you doing here? This part of the castle is private.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to... I got lost... I’m going.”

“No, stay.”

Confused, Bob stopped.

The countess gave him a smile. “It’s nice to have you three boys here at the castle. I’ve watched you from a distance a few times. You find all this very exciting, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Bob admitted uncertainly. “Maybe.”

“You remind me a lot of someone. A boy your age who was also very curious.”

“Your brother?” Bob blurted out too hastily, and he would have liked to bite his tongue.

Countess Codrina stared at him. “How do you know about my brother?”

“I... have read about the history of the castle. I’m very sorry that your brother disappeared then.”

“You’ve read about it,” the countess repeated, smiling. “You see, that’s what I mean. Alexandru read a lot too. He was as inquisitive as you and your friends.” She held up the book. “This was his favourite book. Do you know it? It’s about an explorer—Pierre Aronnax. He explores the sea and comes across all sorts of fantastic things. Alexandru always said that when he grew up, he wanted to be someone like Pierre Aronnax—a scientist.” She hung her head. “My father didn’t like that. He wanted Alexandru to take a different path and punished him for his interest in science.”

“Punished?” Bob wondered.

“Locked up,” the countess confirmed, “in... a cellar... over and over again. It was cruel. You don’t have anything like that nowadays, I hope. Your parents let you read when you want to read, don’t they?”

Bob nodded. “They’re happy when I’m reading and not playing around on my mobile phone.”

“That’s a good thing. That’s very good.” The countess reached out to him and for a moment it looked as if she wanted to stroke his head. Just before she did so, she paused and jerked back as if waking from a dream. Embarrassed, she turned away. “Go back to your friends. I’m sure they’re waiting for you.”

Confused, Bob looked at the countess leaving as she strolled down the corridor and disappeared around the next corner.

It had not escaped Jupiter's notice that Pete had been watching him suspiciously from a distance throughout the day. But so what? As Pete had decided against solving the case, Jupiter didn't owe him an explanation. If he wanted to, he could figure out by himself what Jupiter was doing.

And so without notice, the First Investigator stayed away from dinner and paid a visit to the Wonderland rooms where Hank and Mr Crenshaw kept their equipment. Since everyone was at dinner, no one was around here.

The repaired bat-bot lay on Hank's work table. Right next to it was a roll of duct tape, which came in handy. Jupe made a few changes to the drone and put it in his cloth bag. Along with it was a small plastic bottle of fake blood.

As he stepped outside into the corridor, he almost collided with Steven Yates.

"Well?" wondered Yates. "What are you doing here?"

"I... had forgotten something," Jupiter lied and held up his bag, but without opening it.

Yates nodded disinterestedly. "Listen, good to meet you." He looked around as if he feared being overheard talking voluntarily to one of those hated kids. "Your tip about the music was really helpful."

"I saw it. Congratulations."

"Yeah, well... anyway, thanks for that. I might have been a little rough on you."

"It's okay."

"You're in trouble with your friends right now, aren't you?"

"How do you know that?" Jupe asked.

"I am an actor," Mr Yates explained. "It's part of my job to observe people and their behaviour. That's why the tense atmosphere between you three has not escaped me."

"I see." Jupiter felt no desire whatsoever for this conversation. "I have to get going now."

"One more thing," Yates held him back. "The hardest thing about friendship is admitting your own faults. Real friends only criticize you because they care about you."

The First Investigator nodded assiduously, hoping to get rid of Yates quickly in this way.

Yates patted him fatherly on the shoulder and went his way.

Jupiter looked at him leaving and tried to make sense of Yates. He had been so annoyingly nice. How many of such sayings of wisdom did he know? Perhaps it was a ploy of his to utter them in situations like this and make an impression.

The strangest thing, however, was how long Yates's words continued to resonate in Jupiter.

Half an hour later, Jupiter entered the dining room. By now, there was nobody there except Timeo. Without asking, the cook dished Jupe the leftovers of a Romanian stew.

After the lonely meal, Jupiter went to his room. Bob was reading, Pete was playing on his mobile phone, but neither of them asked him where he had been, and so Jupiter just lay down in bed and pretended to read.

While Bob and Pete were in the washroom brushing their teeth, Jupiter quickly packed his backpack and hid it under the bed. When they came back, he had his book in his hand again and acted as if nothing had happened. One by one, they switched off their bedside lamps.

Jupiter waited for two hours. Then he got up quietly, slipped on his shoes and adjusted the bedspread so that it looked like he was still lying under it. He pulled out his backpack and slipped out of the room.

His destination was the east wing. On the way there, he was more careful than ever. He paused at every turn and listened for the slightest sound. He could not let anyone see him, otherwise his plan would fail.

His worry was unfounded. The whole castle seemed to be asleep. In the glow of the night lights that dimly illuminated the corridors, he reached the east wing undetected. There he took the bottle with the fake blood out of his backpack. Carefully, he began to drip a trail on the floor leading away from the foot of the tower. Then he returned, reached into the backpack and pulled out Bob's portable Bluetooth speaker. He switched it on, paired it to his mobile phone and hid it in a hard-to-see alcove not far from the stairs.

A little further down the corridor, there was a large window with a heavy velvet curtain hanging in front of it. The First Investigator crouched down, pushed the curtain aside and exposed a construction he had already installed that afternoon—a power strip from which hung a hot glue gun and a charger for a cordless screwdriver, plus a hand blender and a kettle from the kitchen. Jupiter pulled the borrowed hair dryer out of his backpack, plugged it in as well, switched on all the appliances and pressed the main switch on the power strip.

The hand blender and the hair dryer came to life loudly, but after half a second the outdated power supply at Piatra Castle put a stop to them.

There was a heavy bang and all the lights went out.

Jupiter dropped the curtain over the devices, squeezed into an alcove and pressed play on his mobile phone. A shrill scream echoed through the corridor. A moment later, footsteps sounded. Someone was coming down the stairs.

Jupiter peered cautiously around the corner. Mr Varga, the security guard from the museum, stepped out into the corridor, frantically shining his flashlight in both directions. "*Este cineva?*"

The beam of light fell on the trail of blood on the floor. Varga stumbled.

The shouting got louder: "No! Help! Oh, please, no!"

The guard hesitated briefly, glanced back at the stairs and finally hurried down the corridor towards the panicked screams.

As soon as he was out of sight, Jupiter pressed 'stop' and left his hiding place. He hurried to the stairs and crept up the steps.

At one end of the upper floor was a white folding chair in front of a closed wooden door. Next to it on the floor lay a carelessly dropped Romanian newspaper next to a flask and a coffee mug.

Jupiter pulled Pete's lock pick set out of his backpack. He didn't have much time. Even if the guard didn't find the Bluetooth speaker, no one screamed anymore and the blood trail led nowhere. Sooner or later he would return to his post. In the worst case, even with the suspicion of having been lured away, Jupiter should have managed to open this door by then. This was the only step in his plan that he had not been able to prepare for, because Pete always carried the lock pick set with him and Jupiter had only taken it when the Second Investigator had left the room to brush his teeth.

Jupiter inserted a lock pick that seemed to fit into the keyhole and fumbled with it in the mechanism. It clicked and clacked softly. This was not a sophisticated lock, but one with a simple mechanism, perhaps a hundred years old. Still, picking a lock wasn't easy for someone without much experience.

Nothing happened. Jupiter twisted the lock pick around more and more frantically in the keyhole and lost more and more control over what he was doing. The guard could reappear at any second. If he caught Jupiter in the act, then...

Jupiter closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

‘Fingertip feeling...’ he heard Pete’s voice in his head. He let go of the lock pick, relaxed his hand and tried again. This time he tried to feel the inside of the door lock, as if the lock pick were the extension of his fingers. A picture formed in his mind’s eye and he was suddenly quite sure where to apply pressure and where to turn.

And indeed—it clicked and the handle was pushed down. The door opened. Jupiter quickly went into the chamber and immediately shut the door.

He was relieved, but he had no time to lose. With the light from his mobile phone, he shone around the small tower chamber. A safe stood on a plain table in the middle of the chamber. Apart from that, the place was largely empty. There were no windows, only narrow embrasures. This circumstance made the chamber an ideal place to keep the medallion. It was impossible to get in through the embrasures—at least for a human being.

Jupiter stood on tiptoe and felt the ledge above the door. For a moment he panicked when his fingers found nothing. Then he touched the bat-bot. Attached to the belly of the artificial bat was Bob’s action camera which Jupiter had fixed there earlier. Then he had flown the bat-bot from the grassed area of the moat through the embrasure into the tower chamber and landed it on the ledge. He did that during dinner time when no one could see him do it.

The camera had been connected to his mobile phone. That way Jupiter had known where the drone was flying. Inside the tower chamber, however, he had had to let the bat-bot take off and land twenty-two times until the camera had been aligned the way he wanted it. He had feared that the battery would die before then, but finally he had managed the perfect landing on the ledge.

Jupiter switched on the camera and selected the latest video clip. He jumped back a few hours and quickly found what he was looking for. The small screen showed Varga entering the tower chamber after dinner, taking the dragon medallion out of the secured case and opening the safe to put it in. Jupiter zoomed in and played in slow motion, the part where the man entered the code on the keypad.

One-four-three-one.

Jupiter frowned. One-four-three-one? Fourteen hundred and thirty-one—that was the year Vlad Drăculea was born! It was a strange coincidence... if it was one.

He went to the safe and keyed in the sequence of numbers. A small red light went out, and a small green light came on. He opened the door and looked inside.

The safe was empty!

Jupiter sucked in a startled breath. While he was still digesting his shock, he heard an electric hum from outside. He saw light through the gap under the door. The electricity was back. He didn’t have much time left. He closed the safe and hurried to the door. Just as he was about to push down the handle, he heard footsteps on the stairs. Following that was the creaking of the folding chair and the rustling of the newspaper. Varga was back.

The First Investigator was trapped!

14. The Secret Door

Bob dreamed of blood. It gushed out of the stone cross in fountains because someone had set the pump incorrectly.

The blood splashed Steven Yates, Betty and the priest in the face; it splashed against the camera; it splashed on Annabeth, Mr Crenshaw, Jupiter, Pete, himself; it flooded the whole hall and rose furiously. It had already reached the level of the windows. The windows shattered and the blood poured out all over Transylvania.

Everyone shouted in confusion. Pete, however, shouted the loudest. He pointed accusingly at Jupiter and shouted: "It was you! You're up to something. I said so many times. You're up to something. Bob, why don't you say something? Bob!"

Bob looked desperately from one to the other as the blood flowed around him. He had nothing to say.

"Bob!" repeated Pete, shoving him angrily. "Bob! Bob, wake up!"

Bob woke up. "Goodness," he muttered. "What's the matter?"

Pete stood in front of his bed. "You sleep like a rock. Didn't you hear that? Something flew through the window."

"Then close it."

"Through the glass, I mean."

Bob straightened up. The window pane had been smashed. Now he was awake. "What was that?"

"I don't know, I... haven't dared to look yet."

Bob switched on the light. In the corner of the room, something small and black was lying on the floor. It was moving. Bob grabbed a shoe as a weapon and slowly walked towards it. The thing twitched. No, it fluttered two black wings.

"The bat-bot!" Bob exclaimed.

"What?" Pete cried. "What's it doing here?"

He looked over at Jupiter's bed. The First Investigator seemed to be asleep, but it was hard to believe that he did not wake up from all the commotion.

Pete pulled the bedspread away. There's nobody there. He shook his head. "Jupe is out there again. What's going on?"

"We'll know in a minute." Bob tinkered with the drone.

"What are you doing?"

"My action camera! It was attached to the bat-bot." Bob selected the last clip.

The pale and anxious face of the First Investigator appeared on the display. He spoke so quietly that he could hardly be understood: "Fellas, this is an emergency. I'm stuck in the tower chamber in the east wing. The medallion has been stolen. The culprit is probably already in the crypt. You have to get me out of here. Hurry up! Every second counts." The recording ended with that.

"I knew he was up to something! Is he completely out of his mind now?" Pete took a deep breath to allow himself to be fully indignant, but then he let the air escape slowly. He had just noticed something. "Wait a minute! Jupiter Jones, the great First Investigator, has

manoeuvred himself into a trap? He needs our help? Can you believe it?” He smiled maliciously.

“We don’t have time for gloating now.”

“Well, I do.”

Bob shook his head reluctantly. “We have to get Jupe out of there somehow.”

“Have fun.”

Bob ignored him. He wanted to watch the First Investigator’s call for help again. While browsing the list of video clips, he noticed that there was another recording from today. It was several hours long. He played it. It began with the bat-bot flying to the top of the tower in the east wing. It fluttered unerringly through an embrasure into the tower chamber. Less unerringly, it then tried to land on the ledge above the door. It succeeded on the third try, but the bat-bot kept taking off and landing many times.

Finally Bob realized what it was all about. “Jupe positioned the bat-bot to video-record the secret code for the safe.”

As he fast-forwarded, Pete curiously approached and looked over his shoulder.

The guard with the suitcase came into the picture and deposited the medallion in the safe. After that, nothing happened for a long time. Bob fast-forwarded again.

Suddenly something moved at the left edge of the picture. A secret door opened in the wall! A hooded figure slipped through the opening and crept towards the safe.

“That’s the hooded guy I was chasing,” Pete noted in surprise, “and again, the face cannot be seen!”

The hooded figure keyed the code into the keypad, opened the safe, took the medallion and was gone as quickly as he had come.

“There is a secret door to the tower chamber,” Bob stated. “Quick, Pete, the plan, where is it?”

Pete did not move.

Bob looked him in the eyes. “Come on, Pete, we can’t just do nothing. Yes, I know Jupe messed up, but we can’t abandon him now. It’s that simple. Besides, someone stole the medallion, and I want to know who. Will you please get the castle floor plan?”

Pete sighed and pushed a few carelessly thrown clothes back and forth until he found the floor plan of Piatra Castle. He unrolled it on the desk. “You can’t make out anything on this layout. Where is there supposed to be a secret door? There’s not even an adjoining room.”

“Pete, you’re holding the plan the wrong way. That’s not the east tower.”

Pete turned the plan ninety degrees to the left. “I still don’t recognize anything.”

Impatiently, Bob took the plan from his hand and laid it down properly. “This is the east tower.”

“And what’s that dashed line next to it?”

“That should be the curtain wall.”

“This is the only part of the castle that is right next to the tower,” Pete said. “So the secret door leads to the curtain wall?”

“It looks like it.” Bob rolled up the plan and stood up. “Get dressed, Pete, we have no time to lose!”

When they stepped out into the castle courtyard five minutes later, they were greeted by the silver glow of the icy moon. The walls of the castle rose darkly and silently into the night sky. No lights were left on anywhere.

Bob looked up searchingly. “We should reach the tower chamber via the curtain wall.”

“So it’s that wall over there,” Pete said, pointing to the wall where the entrance gate was. “How do we get up there?”

“There’s a staircase up ahead.”

When they went closer, they saw that the staircase had no railing. The narrow stone steps protruded directly from the wall. Bob and Pete hurried up the steps. At the top, the night wind blew through their hair. Over the battlements they had a beautiful and at the same time spooky view of the surrounding mountains.

“Now what?”

“This way.” Bob led Pete over the wall and towards the tower.

“Careful, Bob!” Pete shouted suddenly, grabbing his friend by the arm and yanking him back.

In the last few metres before the tower, a piece of the curtain wall had broken away. That spot was unsecured and Bob almost fell down. Small stones came loose and fell into the depths.

“This is life-threatening,” Bob gasped. “Thank you, Pete.”

“The gap is not wide. We can jump over it... but there’s only a narrow ledge over there. The wall ends at the outer wall of the tower.”

“It should. Do you see the stone coat of arms on the wall? That’s the Kretzulesco family crest.”

“How do you know that?”

“You can find the coat of arms all over the castle,” Bob said, “even on the teacups. Haven’t you noticed it yet?”

Pete shrugged his shoulders. “Coats of arms are not my field of expertise. Long jump is more like it.” Pete took a running start and jumped over the gap in the wall to the other side. “Come on, Bob.” The Second Investigator waved his friend over.

Bob also took a running start and jumped. His legs were not as long as Pete’s, but the gap was fortunately quite narrow. “What now?”

“If we were in a movie, there would now be a secret mechanism in this coat of arms that opens the secret door,” Pete said and began to press around on various parts of the coat of arms. Nothing happened. “Well, I guess we’re not in a movie.”

“Perhaps instead of pressing, you have to push something aside,” Bob reasoned and tried to push parts of the crest—but with no success.

Then Pete’s hands found a small star right in the middle of the coat of arms. It could neither be pressed nor pushed—but it could be turned. “Bob! Something’s moving here!”

After a quarter of a turn, there was a click and a piece of the wall moved to the right of the coat of arms with a quiet scraping sound. A gap became visible. Pete stuck his fingers in and pushed the gap open further until a larger gap had opened up that was wide enough to squeeze through.

Behind it was a narrow, low tunnel that led upwards. It was just a metre long and seemed to end at a solid wall. When Pete pushed against this wall, it swung open outwards—and they looked straight into the tower chamber.

“You were right, Bob,” Pete whispered. He looked around. Except for a table in the middle where the safe was, there seemed to be no one there.

Suddenly someone stepped out of the shadows of the secret door.

“Jupe!” gasped Bob in relief.

Immediately, the First Investigator put his finger to his lips and pointed to the door. “Not so loud,” he whispered. “The guard is sitting out there. I expected you to create a diversion

but I didn't expect a secret door." Astonished, he peered through the opening. "How did you know about this?"

"Why don't we get out of here first in case the guard hears us?" Bob whispered.

Everyone nodded and squeezed out through the secret door.

However on the outside of the tower wall, when Jupiter saw the gap caused by the broken curtain wall, he backed away.

"It's very simple," Bob assured him. "Just one big step."

The First Investigator nodded apprehensively, but let Bob go first. When he saw that even the smallest of them made it across the gap effortlessly, he followed suit but only after he had put a significant distance between himself and the gap.

On the other side of the gap, he crouched down and breathed a sigh of relief. After taking a moment to stand up, he asked: "So how did you know about the secret door?"

"Well," said Pete, grinning with satisfaction. "The great Jupiter Jones is at a loss for once. Believe it or not, to find the secret door, we had the same information at our disposal as you did."

Jupiter frowned. "Impossible. What kind of information is that supposed to be?"

"Maybe next time you'll finish watching the video," Bob suggested, showing him the clip on the action camera.

Jupiter watched in amazement as the hooded figure stepped through the secret door and stole the medallion.

"I had to set priorities," he tried to talk his way out of it. "Given my precarious situation, it seemed more fitting to waste no time and record a call for help rather than watch five hours of video footage of uncertain use."

"There's a fast-forward function," Bob reminded. "How do you think we came across that footage?"

"Really sloppy investigation work," Pete commented.

The First Investigator cleared his throat uneasily. "Anyway, how did you find the way here?"

"With this," Bob said, showing him the curtain wall on the floor plan. "It was only logical that the curtain wall leads to the secret door."

"—And that again was first-class investigation work," Pete said.

"—Not to mention that we also figured out how to open the secret door," Bob added.

"Then you've learned a lot from me," Jupiter said, nodding patronisingly at them. "It may have taken a bit long, but otherwise—"

The Second Investigator shook his head in bewilderment. "A word of thanks would have sufficed, Jupe."

Jupiter pretended not to have heard him at all, walked past them and was a few metres away when he noticed that Bob and Pete made no move to follow. "What's wrong?"

"Not so fast, Jupe," Pete said. "How about an apology?"

"What?"

"Don't act so innocent. For all the ridicule you've given us, for going it alone, and all that."

"We don't have time for that now."

"Oh, yeah?" Pete continued. "You always have time to lecture us about how slow and dim-witted we are."

"I certainly didn't give a lecture, that would—"

"We are still The Three Investigators," Bob interrupted him, "and not the Master Investigator and his two minions."

Challengingly, Pete and Bob crossed their arms and looked at the First Investigator.

Jupiter slumped his shoulders, panting. “All right then. I apologize. I won’t undertake any more solo ventures.”

“—And you will consider our opinions from now onwards,” Pete added.

“Okay, okay,” Jupe said placatingly, “and I hope that you would stick to our motto that ‘We Investigate Anything’.”

“All right,” Pete said. He held up his hand. Jupiter chimed in and Bob sealed the pact.

“Do we agree that a solved case is better than an unsolved one?” asked Bob.

His two friends agreed. They went down the stairs, through the courtyard and into the castle.

When they finally stood in front of the chamber in the west wing, Pete felt in his trouser pocket. “Well, did I—”

Jupiter handed him the lock pick set and smiled apologetically. Pete refrained from a biting comment and picked the lock at lightning speed.

Inside the chamber, the cupboard had been moved aside. Without hesitation, they climbed through the hole.

When they were going through the passageway leading to the iron-barred door of the crypt, they set off the red-light silent alarm... but there was no one here who could have been warned.

When they reached the door, it was wide open. In the cross-shaped indentation was the dragon medallion.

15. Inside the Crypt

“Darn,” Jupiter hissed. “I hope we’re not too late.”

Bob put his index finger to his lips. “Quiet now!”

One after the other, they stepped through the door.

The crypt was larger than expected. Its walls were not constructed from stone blocks, but were of raw rock, which made it look like a natural cave. Only the columns holding up the high vaulted ceiling and the evenness of the floor revealed that it was an artificially constructed cavern.

To the left and right, slab-covered tombs rose from the ground. The inscriptions were covered by a thick layer of dust. In the centre of the crypt was a pedestal. On it was a life-size statue of a woman. The associated tomb lay in front of it. It was lit by a construction spotlight and in the light was someone busy digging the tomb with a shovel.

The person was facing away from the door and so did not notice the boys entering. The shovels of earth flew onto a rather respectable pile next to it.

At a signal from Jupiter, The Three Investigators crept closer. Bob took his action camera out of his pocket and recorded a video from the hollow of his hand. The three of them stopped at a safe distance.

“Drop the shovel!” said Jupiter loudly. His voice echoed eerily.

The figure flinched and paused for a second before slowly straightening up.

“Drop it, Luciana.”

Bob and Pete stared at Jupiter in amazement.

“Luciana?” repeated Bob incredulously.

Then the figure turned around and pulled the hood off.

“Guys,” Luciana said, a little out of breath. Sweat beaded on her forehead. “How did you... Oh, never mind. You’ve come at just the right moment.” Panting, she climbed out of the hole, using the shovel like a walking stick. “You were right about everything you claimed the other day. Repta wanted—”

“Spare us that, Luciana. We know by now that this has nothing to do with Repta. It has to do with you.”

“Jupe,” Pete whispered barely audibly beside him. “Are you really sure? Why don’t you let her finish first?”

“No need to, Pete,” Jupiter replied in normal volume. “It all makes sense. You are an expert on Transylvania, on Piatră Castle and on Vlad Drăculea. So you had the perfect background knowledge to commit this crime from the start. You had probably been fascinated for some time by the idea of finding Vlad’s ruby, which you suspected was here in the sealed-up crypt. You just didn’t know how to go about it.

“When you heard about the filming that was to take place at Piatră Castle, you made a plan. You brought yourself in as a historical advisor and from then on you had unrestricted access to the castle and all the rooms. Through your research you also knew that you would need the dragon medallion to open the entrance to the crypt. Fortunately for you, as a historian, some inside connections are available to you, for example, the one to the museum director’s office.”

Bob gasped in surprise. "You mean the deal with the museum was only there from the beginning—"

"To bring the medallion to the castle, exactly, Bob... and with her knowledge of the secret door to the tower chamber, Luciana then suggested the chamber as the ideal place to store it. The most difficult task may have been to convince Annabeth that it was worth using the real medallion for the filming rather than having a replica made. You obviously have a lot of influence on everything that happens here. You even picked the code for the safe—one-four-three-one... fourteen hundred and thirty-one."

Bob was still stunned. "You said there was no heirloom," he said reproachfully. "You knew we were on to it from the start and you led us around by the nose—especially me."

Luciana had been standing there silently and frozen the whole time. Only now did she put the shovel aside and take a step towards the boys. Her gaze was pleading. "You don't understand," she said softly.

"If everything Jupe said is true, we understand quite well," Pete replied. "So where is the heirloom?"

"She hasn't found it yet," Jupiter said, "which is why she is still digging."

Luciana bowed her head. "I tell you... you don't understand. I have to find the heirloom. I'm doing this for my grandfather."

"For your grandfather?" Pete frowned. "Now I don't understand."

"My grandfather founded the brotherhood at that time together with Sorin Kretzulesco, the father of the countess and Alexandru."

"Georghe Popescu was your grandfather?" asked Bob in surprise.

Luciana nodded. "He was sure that the ruby must be buried here. After all, Vlad had given it to his beloved Elisabeta, and since the ruby hadn't turned up anywhere else, it must have been buried here with her. My grandfather urged Sorin to dig here in the crypt. He refused, so my grandfather secretly sneaked in here. However, Sorin caught him starting to dig. The two got into a big argument.

"Shortly after Alexandru disappeared on the night of the initiation ritual, Sorin blamed my grandfather. He believed Alexandru's disappearance was Vlad's punishment because his lover's grave had been desecrated. My grandfather was banished from the brotherhood."

"He didn't get another chance to continue his search because the crypt was sealed up a little later," Jupiter continued the story. "That's why you're doing it in his place now."

"So you were the hooded figure who surprised us outside here last night," Pete said.

"Hold on! That can't be. I didn't see the face, but from the build... it was definitely a man."

"I recalled something as well," Bob took over. "Last night, after seeing that the cupboard has been moved, the hooded figure still came into the passageway. That tells me that he was expecting his accomplice here, instead he found us, and Pete gave chase."

"Well observed, fellas," Jupe said. "Also, knocking that hole in the wall would have been very difficult and exhausting for one person to do in such a short time. Also you have to be present elsewhere in the castle for the filming. That suggests that you did not act alone."

"So, who are you in cahoots with?" Pete asked.

Luciana remained silent so Jupiter continued: "It must have been someone who had access to the castle before the filming began because that was when the knocking started. It was also someone who could move around undisturbed and who could sedate the countess."

"Not bad," someone suddenly said behind them. "Not bad at all."

The Three Investigators turned around.

Timeo entered the crypt and came towards them. He wore the same dark clothes with the big hood as Luciana. With both hands he wielded a pickaxe menacingly.

“So it is,” Pete murmured.

“Why are you here now?” asked Luciana. “I told you I needed more time.” She picked up her shovel, jumped back into the hole and started digging again.

“So they’re in cahoots,” Jupiter said. “They have—”

“I know what I have,” Timeo interrupted him gruffly. “You don’t have to explain it to me. Luciana! Stop digging. Look how deep the hole is already. You won’t find anything there. We have to get out of here.”

However, Luciana only dug more frantically. Loose earth flew through the air.

“Come on, Luciana.” Timeo walked towards her. “We already have the medallion. Let’s go!”

Jupiter nodded barely noticeably to his friends. This was the appropriate moment to run away! But immediately Timeo raised the pickaxe and let it whiz through the air in a wide arc. They could not get past him. “You three don’t move! *Să mergem*, Luciana!”

“—But the ruby,” Luciana protested.

“Don’t you get it? There is no ruby! Otherwise you would have found it long ago.”

Luciana turned around. Tears of anger and disappointment shimmered in her eyes. “What do you know? I don’t pay you to think.”

Timeo said something in Romanian and they argued briefly. Finally he seemed to have convinced Luciana. Resignedly, she lowered the shovel, climbed out of the hole and went to Timeo. She did not look at the boys. Meanwhile, Timeo dismantled the construction spotlight.

“What are you going to do with them?” asked Luciana. “Are you going to leave them here? They are still kids.”

“Kids who know too much,” Timeo said. “If we let them go, they run straight to the police.”

“No, definitely not!” Pete affirmed.

“You should have kept your hands off from the beginning.” Timeo shook his head. “It’s your own fault.” He tucked the construction spotlight under his arm and moved backwards towards the exit. “You guys stay there.”

Luciana followed him. She looked back at The Three Investigators one last time. Her desperate gaze remained on Bob. Silent tears streamed down her face. Then she lowered her head, turned and hurried out of the crypt.

Timeo also stepped through the door and then turned around to take a last look into the crypt.

“You can’t lock us in here!” shouted Jupiter.

“Stop!” shouted Bob.

The Three Investigators ran towards the door, but at that moment it closed with a dull thud. As they tried to open it, the ancient lock audibly clicked. The sound died away in the crypt.

16. Alexandru's Secret

"Open up!" Pete rammed his shoulder against the door. Even with combined forces, it did not move at all.

"It's useless, fellas," Jupiter sighed.

Pete saw the perplexity in Jupiter's face and very briefly anger rose in him. "It's all—" Pete blurted out but stopped short of saying 'your fault!' It wasn't Jupiter's fault. They had gone to the crypt together and they had exposed the culprits. No one could have foreseen that Timeo was working with Luciana.

"This is all a big mess," Pete said, kicking the door. "We're done for... so done for." Nervously, he began to pace up and down.

"Now please calm down," Bob said.

"How am I supposed to calm down?"

Bob shrugged and raised the action camera that had been running along the whole time. "At least we have a flawless confession."

"Great, Bob, and what good would it do for us down here? Nobody knows we're in this stupid crypt. How are they supposed to find us here?"

At that moment, Jupiter's mobile phone light went out. Pete noticed that his light wasn't shining as brightly as it had ten minutes ago either. "Mine's about to go off as well."

"We can't give up now," Bob said. "There's bound to be a way out of here. Right, Jupe?"

The First Investigator went back to the statue and walked up and down it while he pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. "There have to be some clues somewhere..." he murmured.

"Well, great," said Pete. "Now our First Investigator has lost his mind too."

"Not at all, Pete," Jupe said without interrupting his rambling or even looking at Pete. "I am merely thinking about a person who has been in a similar situation to ours."

"You speak in riddles."

"He means Alexandru," Bob intervened. "Right?"

Jupiter nodded. "We know that Alexandru was to be admitted to the brotherhood at that time and that he was to spend a night here in the crypt for that purpose."

"Yes... so?" Pete wondered.

"He must have got out of here somehow..."

"Maybe he did... if Vlad took him," Pete suggested.

Suddenly Bob sucked in a sharp breath. Something had just occurred to him. "It wasn't the first time Alexandru had been locked in the crypt."

"Not the first time?" asked Jupiter. "What makes you say that?"

"The countess told me."

"You spoke to her?"

"Today—I more or less ran into her. She told me that her father used to lock Alexandru up back then—in a cellar—to punish him because he was more interested in his books than in the brotherhood... but I don't think she meant a cellar. She meant the crypt—which is here!"

Jupiter frowned. "—That could mean that..."

"Yes, isn't it?" Bob nodded excitedly.

"Excuse me, would someone please enlighten me?" asked Pete.

"Alexandru was locked up here," Jupiter said, "more than once. He must have hated it."

"—And feared," Bob added.

"Right, and then on the night of the initiation ritual, he apparently disappeared without a trace... but what if Alexandru himself wanted to disappear? To escape his brutal father and the brotherhood?"

"That would really be possible," Pete murmured, "but just wanting something doesn't help anyone. I want to get out of here too, but I don't know how."

Jupiter looked thoughtfully at the statue of Elisabeta. "Alexandru had enough time to think about this question during the nights he had to spend here. He had the opportunity to examine this crypt... and he had enough knowledge of this place to perhaps get to the bottom of a secret."

"What kind of secret?" asked Pete, who again had the feeling of losing the thread.

"How hundreds of years ago Vlad Drăculea could walk in and out of here unnoticed. The crypt was his and Elisabeta's secret meeting place, because Vlad had many enemies. To protect his beloved, he probably sneaked in."

Now Pete finally understood what Jupiter was getting at. "You mean there's another secret door here?"

"—Or a secret passage, to be precise... and Alexandru found it after thinking about it in a similar way."

Hopefully, they looked around.

"All I see here are columns," Pete said.

"There was nothing about a secret passage on the floor plan either," Bob said.

"Secret passages are, as the name suggests, secret. May I?" Jupiter borrowed Bob's light and walked with it to the far wall of the crypt. "I would expect such a passage to lead directly to the defence wall and then out into the open, in a place that is not visible to outsiders. Since we are here in the south-western wing and the main entrance of the castle is to the north, this would be the shortest way out." He pointed to the spot in the wall just behind the statue. "So if I wanted to get into the crypt unseen, I would build an entrance here at the back of the castle by the lake."

They began to scan the wall and knock against the rock face. Then they examined all the columns nearby. Nowhere was anything to be found. Instead, Pete's mobile phone lamp finally went out. Now only Bob's shone. Frustrated, they sat down next to the base of the statue.

"That must have been how Alexandru felt at the time," Bob murmured.

"Maybe it's all nonsense and he really was taken by Vlad," Pete said quietly.

"Then now would be the right time for Vlad to show up," Bob suggested. His mobile phone light flickered one last time before it too went out. "Congratulations."

The darkness was impenetrable. No one said anything anymore. Everyone listened. Only their own breathing could be heard... until Pete pulled something out of his pocket and fiddled with it. A small flame flared up with a hiss and created an island of warm light.

"Your Wonderland matches!" Bob marvelled.

"I told you, you never know when you might need them."

"If you burn the whole pack, we might only have five more minutes of light," Bob said. "Great."

The flame flickered and went out. "Maybe just two minutes." Pete lit a new match. It also went out immediately. "Did one of you blow?"

"No," Jupiter said.

The Second Investigator stood up, lit another match and protected the flame with the hollow of his hand. Gingerly, he walked up and down with it. Near the statue, the flame began to flicker.

With the next match, Pete found that the draught that blew out the flame was strongest around the base of the statue. The third match brought the proof. Where the statue's base stood on the pedestal, there was a gap from which cold air flowed through.

"Give me a hand, fellas!" said Pete excitedly.

In complete darkness, they braced themselves against the statue. Slowly, it shifted a few centimetres. Slowly, it became easier when they knew the direction of movement. With a sharp sound of stone scraping against stone, the statue turned ninety degrees to the side. Where it had stood, a narrow shaft now led into the depths.

Pete lit another match and shone it in. "There are steps carved into the stone." He just managed to see the steps before the draught extinguished the match.

"I presume that after Elisabeta was buried here, this statue of her was constructed and placed on top of this opening to conceal it..." Jupiter said. "Also, after Alexandru escaped, I suspect that his father moved the statue back in position so that no others knew what happened, only to speculate that Vlad took him."

"Well, Jupe," Pete said, "how about you stay here and ask the statue yourself while Bob and I make our way out?"

"Let's go down now," Bob decided and took the lead.

One by one, they climbed down the shaft. The draught was now more noticeable. At the bottom, there was a narrow, low tunnel that had been cut into the bare rock. It was just wide enough to squeeze through one at a time.

Pete lit one match after the next, but they all quickly went out and the pack was soon empty.

"That was the last one," he muttered, letting go of the burnt stick.

They continued to grope their way through absolute darkness.

"Up ahead!" shouted Bob. "I see light!"

They stumbled forward until a wall of undergrowth blocked the way. Bob tore apart the vines and branches—and stood in the open!

"We did it!" Pete cheered. However, the joy vanished when he realized where exactly they were—on a narrow ledge jutting out of a rock face, with a vertical drop all around. Far below them lay the lake like a black mirror.

Dawn coloured the sky grey, while the forest was still bathed in darkness. The Second Investigator looked up. High above them, the rock wall merged into the outer wall of the castle. It was impossible to climb up there.

Peering into the depths, Jupiter's eyes snapped open and he staggered back, clawing at the vines that hid the secret passage from the outside. "Goodness gracious!"

Bob also looked down. "It's not that high. Maybe eight metres?"

"Too high for me," Jupiter objected, closing his eyes and pressing himself as close to the rock face as possible while his fingers groped for a secure hold.

Meanwhile, Pete looked around. "Apparently there was once a narrow path hewn into the rock, see? You could get up or down this way, but it has collapsed over the centuries. From the looks of it, there are only two ways out of here—either back through the secret passage or —" He stretched his arm over the abyss and pointed downwards.

"You can't be serious," Jupiter cried.

Pete nodded. "Yes, I'm serious. We have to jump."

"We'll break every bone in our bodies," Jupiter said in fear.

“Don’t worry, the water is deep enough,” Pete said.

The First Investigator squinted at the tendril curtain. “Maybe we should go back to the crypt and look for another—”

Bob shook his head silently. “Come on. We’re only wasting time unnecessarily.”

“Yes, we have to jump,” Pete urged. “Hold on! Bob, what about your camera? We need the video in it as proof.”

“Not to worry,” Bob replied. “It’s an action camera and it is waterproof.”

Then he and Pete held out their hands to Jupiter encouragingly.

Jupiter swallowed, nodded tentatively, courageously took a step forward and grasped his friends’ hands. He looked into the depths. The lake seemed to lie a great distance below them. It exerted an uncanny pull on him, as if it wanted to drag him down. Jupiter felt dizzy. No, he couldn’t, no way, he wanted to turn back immediately, he had to—.

“Let’s go,” Pete interrupted his train of thought. “On three.”

“One,” Jupiter heard himself say.

“Two,” said Pete.

“Three!” they all shouted together and jumped.

The fall into the depths was short and endless at the same time. They were suddenly immersed in icy water. Jupiter squinted his eyes, everything around him bubbled, his clothes became soaked. He was pulled into the depths and no longer knew where up and down were. For a moment, he rowed around in panic, but then he was automatically propelled upwards and two leg strokes later he broke through the surface of the water, snorting.

“Well, finally,” Pete exclaimed with relief. Apparently Bob and Pete had surfaced above the water seconds before him.

Jupiter looked up at the rock face. They had actually made it. They had jumped. He let out a whooping cry. Then he scrambled towards the shore.

“What’s keeping you, fellas?” he cried with a laugh. “We have a case to solve!”

17. Questions From the Countess

They had to walk along the lake shore and then through a grove to get to the front of the castle. From there, they went up the slope of the moat and over the bridge to the main entrance.

“Look,” Bob gasped as they reached the bridge. “Police!”

Two cars with the word ‘*POLITIA*’ on them were parked in front of the castle. The courtyard was bustling with activity. People from the movie crew were carrying boxes and tripods out. A lot of equipment was already piled up in a corner.

“The news seems to have spread,” Bob said, looking anxiously at the boxes, “but why are they carrying all this stuff out that they only carried in a couple of days ago?”

The Three Investigators hurried into the castle, up the stairs and into the Knight’s Hall. In one corner, Mr Varga was being questioned by two policemen, which in turn Betty and half the team were watching tensely from another corner.

Steven Yates was pacing back and forth with his mobile phone, looking for reception. When he saw Jupiter, he called out: “You’re wanted, boys,” and pointed to Mr Crenshaw and Hank, who were busy packing up a box.

Pete’s father also noticed the three boys.

“Dad,” Pete said as he approached his father.

“Where have you been again?” asked Mr Crenshaw, upset. “All hell has broken loose here. The dragon medallion has been stolen. The police are already searching the whole castle. Annabeth is under suspicion, and the countess is furious. She blames the whole movie crew for the theft, and she has kicked us out. We’re all supposed to be gone by noon at the latest.”

He looked them suspiciously. “This doesn’t have anything to do with you guys, does it? Wait a minute, why are you so wet? What have you done now?”

“Nothing, Mr Crenshaw,” Jupiter said. “Annabeth is innocent.”

“Of course she is,” Mr Crenshaw said. “It wasn’t one of us, I’m quite sure of that, but that means the perpetrator was able to escape.”

“The perpetrators,” Jupiter corrected him.

“The what?”

“The perpetrators,” Jupiter repeated, “because we have—” He interrupted himself, looked at Pete and gave him an encouraging nod.

“—Because we have solved this case, Dad,” Pete said. Bob handed Pete the action camera and he played the video from the crypt for his father.

A little later, The Three Investigators knocked quietly on the door to Alexandru’s room.

“*Vă rog, intrați!*” came from inside.

For the first time, they saw Alexandru’s old room in daylight. The countess stood at the window and looked out over the courtyard while Annabeth talked to her.

“I understand that you are angry, but if we really have to stop the filming now, then...” Annabeth fell silent. She looked helplessly at The Three Investigators and left the room with her shoulders slumped.

Now the boys were alone with the countess. After Annabeth had left, Codrina Kretzulesco turned to them.

“So you are investigators? I should have guessed that. I’m really angry about what happened here at the castle right under my eyes. The inspector has just told me what you have put on record... but he must have misunderstood something... You haven’t really found out who is behind the theft, have you?”

“Yes, we have,” Jupiter said, confirming in brief what the countess had already heard. “They are already searching for Luciana and Timeo.”

She raised her eyebrows in amazement. “That is... quite amazing what you have accomplished.”

“That’s not all,” Jupiter said, clearing his throat. “In the course of the investigation, I came across something—”

Bob pushed Jupiter a little and gave him a reproachful look.

“I mean, we have come across something that should be of interest to you. There is a logical explanation for your brother’s disappearance.”

A barely perceptible tremor ran through the countess. “What are you talking about?”

“A secret passage out of the crypt. All the evidence suggests that Alexandru knew about this secret passage at the time and fled.”

“At least we’re sure he wasn’t taken by Vlad,” Pete added.

“A secret passage,” the countess repeated, hope flickering in her gaze. She tried to control her excitement and went back to the window. “I never believed he was taken, or just disappeared. I always thought he must have managed to escape somehow. Now there is a secret passage... that’s something that my brother would like.”

She went to the bookshelf and stroked her fingers over the many brittle spines, over the scientific equipment and the framed awards on the wall. She paused by the small table that held Alexandru’s globe and his favourite book.

“Our father brought us up according to the strict rules of the brotherhood. Alexandru, however, was a curious boy who was passionate about science. He was a little inventor. He was always tinkering with something... I remember he designed load cranes for the castle towers... and water filters for the well...”

She then pulled out from the Jules Verne book a drawing of the strange cylindrical apparatus that was apparently one of Alexandru’s inventions.

“My father didn’t like it. I was too young at the time to really understand the argument between the two. Only years after Alexandru’s disappearance did I realize that life here must have been a torture for him. I began to look for him, but every trace quickly disappeared. I learned to accept that.”

The countess further explained that when she took over the castle after her father’s death, she insisted that her brother’s room be sealed off and remain intact as it was. Only now, when she saw the three boys, they reminded her so much of her brother that she came into the room to recollect her thoughts.

“Countess Codrina,” Bob said, “we believe your brother may still be alive.”

She shook her head as if trying to shoo away the burgeoning hope. “Then why hasn’t he contacted me all these years?”

The three of them were thinking on how to answer her when there was a knock at the door.

The countess took one deep breath. “*Da, vă rog, intrați!*”

Mr Crenshaw entered. He looked excited. “They’ve got her. The police have caught Luciana and her accomplice Timeo just before the border to Moldova.”

“—And they were arrested because of the help of these young men?” asked the countess. “What about the medallion?”

“They had it with them. It was seized by the police.”

Jupe, Pete and Bob cheered inwardly.

Mr Crenshaw continued: “If it hadn’t been for you three, I think it would have been irretrievably lost and the culprits would be long gone.” He walked over to them, put his hands on Bob’s and Jupiter’s shoulders and said: “Really good work, boys. I think I owe you boys an apology—especially to you, Pete.” Remorsefully, he looked his son in the eye.

Pete was immensely relieved. “It’s all right, Dad. We investigators don’t hold grudges.”

The boys laughed and Mr Crenshaw proudly embraced his son.

The First Investigator turned to the lady of the castle. “Countess Codrina, as you hear, the perpetrators have been caught and the medallion is intact. Please do not throw the movie crew out of the castle. Annabeth and the crew are completely innocent of anything that has happened.”

Thoughtfully, the countess eyed The Three Investigators. Finally she said: “Mr Crenshaw, would you please tell Miss Parker that the filming can continue as planned?”

Mr Crenshaw was overwhelmed. “Of course. Thank you, Countess.”

Countess Codrina Kretzulesco smiled. “Don’t thank me. Thank these three young gentlemen.”

“Well, come along, boys,” said Mr Crenshaw, beaming. “You can tell Annabeth yourselves.”

“Just a moment,” the countess called out as The Three Investigators were already heading for the door. She hesitated for a brief moment before daring to ask her most pressing question: “If my brother is really still alive—do you have any idea where he is?”

Jupiter looked at the old globe on which several coastal cities were marked with colourful flags. “We might be able to get some clues...” he murmured, pinching his lower lip.

18. Professor Aronnax

“Here we are,” Jupiter said. The bus slowed down and stopped at the bus stop of the Institute of Oceanography in San Diego. The doors opened with a hiss and The Three Investigators got off.

Four days had passed since their return from Romania. The internship was over. They would spend the rest of their holidays at home in Rocky Beach and perhaps land another case. But first they had to bring the case to a conclusion. First and foremost was to find the answer to the question of where Alexandru Kretzulesco had disappeared to sixty years ago.

The Institute of Oceanography in San Diego was one of the oldest and largest marine research institutes in the world, and it was only a three-hour bus ride from Rocky Beach.

Pete went to an information panel in front of the building and read the event announcements. “We’re at the right place. The marine scientists’ conference begins tomorrow.”

Jupe nodded knowingly. “—And that is why we are here today. This way, hopefully, we’ll catch Professor Aronnax in a quiet minute.”

They entered the building and went to the reception desk, where a young gentleman looked at them questioningly over the top of his glasses. “What can I do for you?”

“We would like to see Professor Aronnax. We have brought him an important book from his sister.”

“Oh? I didn’t know the professor had a sister. He’s in the main auditorium right now. Up the stairs over there and through the big door.”

Jupiter thanked him.

They entered the empty auditorium. The stage was lit up. At the lectern stood an old man with white hair and bushy white eyebrows. He had a stack of papers in his hand and was rehearsing his talk. In the front row, a staff member sat with a laptop on his lap, supervising the projection of the graphics that were to be shown on a screen during the lecture.

“The sea and its infinite mysteries have fascinated me since I was a little boy,” the professor just spoke into his mic. His accent was barely perceptible. “For hours, I could occupy myself with my globe and trace the coastlines.” Aronnax turned to his associate. “—And then at this point, show Slide 36 with the old nautical charts...”

He just happened to look up and saw The Three Investigators approaching the stage through the long centre aisle. “Hold on! We have visitors,” he told his associate.

“Can I help you gentlemen?” the professor addressed the three boys. “I’m happy to have a young audience, but I’m afraid the lecture is tomorrow.”

“We are not here for the lecture,” Jupiter explained. He walked up the steps to the stage and when he reached the professor, he held out the scuffed copy of *20.000 De Leghe Sub Mări*. “We believe this belongs to you.”

Staring at the book in disbelief, Aronnax stroked the yellowed cover with trembling fingers and looked around in confusion. “Where did you get this—”

“Perhaps you can spare a few minutes for us,” Jupiter suggested.

Shortly afterwards, they were sitting in Aronnax’s office. With its old books and measuring devices, it looked like the grown-up version of Alexandru’s room at Piatra Castle.

“So this is really your book?” asked Bob, looking at the professor’s furrowed face. “You are Alexandru Kretzulesco?”

The professor winced as if someone had caught him doing something forbidden. “It’s been a long time since someone called me by that name,” he said. Then he looked at the book and leafed through it carefully. Finally he put it aside. “How did you find me?”

“Back then, you disappeared seemingly without leaving a trace.”

“—And yet I almost succeeded,” the professor said.

Jupiter nodded. “A boy’s room reveals a lot about him. The scientific equipment, the prizes, all the books about oceans—and then there were the flags on the globe. At first they just seemed to mark random coastal cities, but a closer look revealed that there’s a famous institute of oceanography in each of those cities.”

“It took us a few days to check them all out,” Bob continued. “There was no Alexandru Kretzulesco teaching or working at any of those institutes.”

“The solution to the mystery was literally right under our noses.” Jupiter pointed to the book. “Your sister told us that this used to be your favourite book. You wanted to be like the narrator of the story, Pierre Aronnax. We didn’t find a Pierre, but we did find a Xander Aronnax, professor in this institute and a luminary in the filtration of microplastics from the ocean.”

Jupe reached for the book and pulled out the drawing of the cylindrical apparatus. “This sketch gave me a headache for a long time, until I found out that it was a water filtration system.”

When the professor picked up the drawing, he was overwhelmed by his feelings. Tears came to his eyes. “For years I have waited for my past to catch up with me... for someone to suddenly address me by my real name... but never did I expect it to happen in this unusual way.”

“What exactly happened then?” asked Pete.

“Perhaps you have heard about my childhood. I wanted to escape from home at a very early age. The world my father lived in was just not mine.”

“And then you found the secret passage,” Bob inferred.

The professor nodded. “I’ve been locked in that damned crypt for countless nights. No child should be punished for his dreams. When I saw the opportunity to escape, I took it.”

“Your sister firmly believed that you had escaped,” Pete said. “She looked everywhere for you. Why didn’t you contact her?”

The professor’s look became wistful. “Not a day went by that I didn’t ask myself that. At first it was the fear that my father might find out about me... or that I would get my sister into trouble if she had to keep a secret from him. Then later I was afraid that maybe she wouldn’t want to know about me after I’d played dead for so long.”

“Your sister would really want to hear from you,” Pete said.

The professor nodded gratefully.

“And what about Vlad’s heirloom?” asked Jupiter abruptly.

Bob looked at him questioningly. “But we were made to understand that there is no heirloom.”

“Of course,” Jupiter smiled knowingly, “unless someone has already found and took it.”

Alexandru Kretzulesco grinned. “You are really clever boys, I must say. Yes, I found the ruby. It was in Elisabeta’s tomb.”

“So it does exist?” marvelled Bob.

“And you dug it up?” asked Pete.

The professor nodded and seemed, for a brief moment, to be lost in thoughts of that time.

"I see," Bob continued. "So I suppose you took the ruby with you, perhaps to finance your escape and your new life."

"No. I was tempted to take it with me, but in the end I left it behind. I didn't want to buy my freedom with something I despised."

"But then where has it been all this time?" Pete wanted to know.

A sly grin flitted across the professor's face. "Maybe I'll tell you some other time... because after all your questions, I have a question for you. You said you were at Piatră Castle for some filming, and while there, you found out my secret... but one question remains—why were you so interested in this? Why did you start asking questions? Or more simply, who are you three anyway?"

The Three Investigators gave each other proud looks.

"We are The Three Investigators, sir," Jupiter announced. He then reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card. It said:



A few weeks later, Aunt Mathilda beckoned The Three Investigators to her as they were returning from a shopping trip with Uncle Titus.

Jupiter's aunt was sitting in the office and tapping on an old calculator. On the desk was a framed autograph card of Steven Yates on which was written 'For Mathilda'.

"Mail for you," she said as the boys entered the office.

Jupiter recognized the Romanian stamps on the envelope from a distance and wanted to take it immediately, but at the last second, Aunt Mathilda pulled it away. "Only when you have unloaded the stuff from the truck."

"But—" Jupe fell silent. In situations like this, there was no point in arguing with Aunt Mathilda.

They had never heaved the purchases off the back of the pick-up truck as quickly as they did that day and distributed them in the salvage yard. Dust-covered and out of breath, they returned to the office and finally Jupiter's aunt handed them the envelope.

So as not to be interrupted, Jupiter, Pete and Bob ran into Headquarters to open the envelope.

The envelope contained only a photograph.

"There's something on the back," Pete remarked.

Bob read it out:

Dear Three Investigators,

It is not the item in our hands that makes us so happy. Thank you for everything.

Countess Codrina Ekaterina Kretzulesco and

Count Alexandru Damian Kretzulesco aka Xander Aronnax

They looked at the photo. It showed Alexandru and the countess side by side. Both were beaming happily into the camera. They were standing next to the well in the garden of Piatra Castle.

The wooden lid had been removed from the well. On the stone edge lay the self-made water filter that Alexandru had designed as a boy. The cover of the filter had been removed. Between his thumb and forefinger, Alexandru held up to the camera what had been hidden in the apparatus for several decades.

The ruby caught the sunlight and shone and sparkled so strongly, as if to show the world that it was not meant to be locked away in darkness.

It belonged in the light.